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**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:****Cote D'Ivoire**

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COTE D'IVOIRE

The Constitution was suspended following the December 24, 1999 coup d'etat. The Constitution provided for freedom of religion, as does the proposed new constitution, which is to be voted on in a July referendum; the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Both government policy and the generally tolerant relationship among religions in society contribute to the free practice of religion; however, followers of traditional indigenous religions are subject to societal discrimination. The Government monitors minority religions for signs of political activity it considers subversive or dangerous.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion**Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution that was suspended following the December 24, 1999 coup d'etat provided for freedom of religion, and the Government generally protected this right. The post-coup military government continued to respect this right and is proposing a constitution that provides for protection of religious freedom, which is to be voted on in a referendum scheduled for July 23. There is no state religion, but for historical and ethnic reasons the Government informally favored Christianity, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic Church leaders had a much stronger voice in government affairs than their Islamic counterparts, which led to feelings of disenfranchisement among the Muslim population. After assuming power following the coup, General Robert Guei indicated that one of the goals of the transition government was to end this favoritism and put all of the major religious faiths on an equal footing. In practice, the Government has not taken any steps to bring this about.

In 1987-90, then-President Felix Hophuet-Boigny sponsored the construction in his hometown, Yamoussoukro, of the world's largest Catholic church, the "Our Lady of Peace" Basilica, which was modeled on St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and consecrated by the Pope. Although the basilica's construction was financed ostensibly by private funds, allegations persist that funds of the National Cocoa and Coffee Board, a state-owned export monopoly, were diverted for this purpose. The Government also paid for the construction of the Catholic cathedral in Abidjan, which was completed in 1985; part of the cost of building it also was paid by contributions that the Government required of all

salaried workers in the country, regardless of their religious affiliation. The Government sponsors or finances the construction of shrines for groups other than the Catholic Church. It currently is directing the construction of the Plateau Mosque in central Abidjan and financing it with the help of governments or government-affiliated religious organizations of some largely Islamic Arab countries. A high government official has indicated that the Government plans soon to sponsor the construction of a temple for all of the country's Protestant denominations when resources permit.

The Government establishes requirements for religious groups under a 1939 French law. All religious groups wishing to operate in the country must submit to the Ministry of the Interior a file including the group's by-laws, the names of the founding members, the date of founding (or date on which the founder received the revelation of his or her calling), the minutes of the general assembly, the names of members of the administrative board, and other information. The Interior Ministry investigates the backgrounds of the founding members to ascertain that the group has no politically subversive purpose. However, in practice, the Government's regulation of religious groups generally has not been unduly restrictive since 1990, when the Government legalized opposition political parties.

Although nontraditional religious groups, like all public secular associations, are required to register with the Government, no penalties are imposed on a group that fails to register. In practice, registration can bring advantages of public recognition, invitation to official ceremonies and events, publicity, gifts, and school subsidies. No religious group has ever complained of arbitrary registration procedures or recognition. The Government does not register traditional indigenous religious groups.

The Government grants no tax or other benefits to religious groups. However, some religious groups have gained some favors after individual negotiations. Examples include reductions in the cost of resident alien registration, customs exemptions on certain religious items, and, in some cases, privileges similar to those of diplomats. No particular religion is favored consistently in this manner. Occasionally, a state-owned company grants favors to religious leaders, such as a reduction in airplane fare.

Religious Demography

The published results of the most recent national census, conducted in 1998, indicate that Muslims make up about 38.6 percent of the country's population; Catholics make up 19.4 percent; Protestants, 6.6 percent; Harrists, 1.3 percent; other Christians, 3.1 percent; practitioners of traditional indigenous religions, 11.9 percent; practitioners of other religions, 1.7 percent; and persons without religious preference or affiliation, 16.7 percent. Among citizens, 27.4 percent are Muslim, 20.8 percent are Catholic, 8.2 percent are Protestant, 1.6 percent are Harrist, 3.4 percent are of other Christian affiliations, 15.4 percent practice traditional indigenous religions, 1.9 percent practice other religions, and 20.7 percent are without religious affiliation. Foreigners living in the country are 70.5 percent Muslim and 15.4 percent Catholic with small percentages practicing other religions.

Muslims are found in greatest numbers in the northern half of the country, although due to immigration they also are becoming increasingly numerous in the cities of the south. In 1998 Muslims composed 45.5 percent of the total urban population and 33.5 percent of

the total rural population. Catholics are found mostly in the southern, central, and eastern portions of the country. Practitioners of traditional indigenous religions are concentrated in rural areas of the north, west, center, and east. Protestants are concentrated in the central, eastern, and southwest regions. Members of the Harrist Church, an African Protestant denomination founded in the country in 1913 by a Liberian preacher named William Wade Harris, are concentrated in the south.

Both political and religious affiliation tends to follow ethnic lines. As population growth and movement have accentuated ethnic distinctions between the groups of the Sahel and those of the forest zone, those distinctions have been sometimes expressed in terms of religion (e.g., northern Muslims vs. southern Christians and traditionalists).

Religious groups in the country include the Adventist Church, the Assemblies of God, the Southern Baptist Church, Bossonism (the traditional religious practices of the Akan ethnic group), the Autonomous Church of Celestial Christianity of Oschoffa, Islam, Roman Catholicism, the Union of the Evangelical Church of Services and Works of Cote d'Ivoire, the Harrist Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the Protestant Methodist Church of Cote d'Ivoire, the Yoruba First Church, the Church of God International Missions, the Baptist Church Missions, the Church of the Prophet Papa Nouveau (a syncretistic religion founded in the country in 1937, which combines Christian doctrine, traditional African rituals, and practical concern for social, political, and economic progress for Africans), the Pentecostal Church of Cote d'Ivoire, the Messianic Church, the Limoudim of Rabbi Jesus (a small Christian group, the origins of which are not known), the Unification Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Interdenominational Church. Many religious groups in the country are associated with American religious groups.

Most of the country's many syncretistic religions are forms of Christianity that contain some traditional African practices and rituals. Many of these have been founded by Ivoirian or other African prophets and are organized around and dependent upon the founder's personality. Some emphasize faith healing or sale of sacred objects imbued with supernatural powers to bring health and good luck. Many nominal Christians and Muslims practice some aspects of traditional indigenous religions, especially in difficult times.

Traditional indigenous religions, which are not registered officially as religions, rarely are included in official or unofficial lists of the country's religions. There is no generally accepted system of classifying the country's diverse traditional religious practices, which vary not only by ethnic group, but also by region, village, and family, as well as by gender and age group. In addition, members of the country's largely Christianized or Islamicized urban elites, which effectively control the State, generally seem disinclined to accord to traditional indigenous religions the social status accorded to Christianity and Islam. No traditional indigenous religious leader (except for traditional rulers, who also may perform some traditional religious functions) is known ever to have been invited to present New Year's greetings to the President or to take part in a government advisory council.

Generally there has been a trend towards conversion by practitioners of traditional religions to Christianity and Islam. Missionary work, urbanization, immigration, and greater education levels have led to a decline in the percentage of practitioners of traditional religion from 37 percent in 1975 to 11.9 percent in 1998.

Immigrants from other parts of Africa are generally at least nominally Muslim or Christian. The majority of foreign missionaries are European or American representatives of established religions, but some Nigerians and Congolese have set up churches. Foreign missionaries must meet the same requirements as any foreigner, including resident alien registration and identification card requirements.

Until recently, Catholic priests tended to be better educated than leaders of other religions. Numerous Catholic schools were founded in the country in the early 1900's, during French colonial rule, and citizens who attended these schools generally received good educations and came to make up a disproportionately large part of the country's elites. Many senior government officials, including all three heads of state since independence, have been Catholics.

The Baoule ethnic minority, which has dominated the State and the ruling Democratic Party of Cote d'Ivoire (PDCI) from independence in 1960 until 1999, is largely Catholic, although some Baoules continue to practice traditional indigenous religion and a few practice Islam.

The Government has taken steps to improve the situation of Muslims. However, Muslims often have had to struggle for state benefits that came more easily to practitioners of other religions. For example, Catholic and Protestant schools are regarded as official schools supervised by the Ministry of Education and subsidized by the Government. However, until 1994 Islamic schools were regarded as religious schools, were supervised by the Ministry of the Interior, and were unsubsidized even if they followed official school curriculums. Since 1994 Islamic schools that follow official curriculums have been subsidized by the Government. The Government recognized no Muslim religious holidays until 1974 and did not recognize all major Muslim religious holidays until 1994. Churches always have organized Christian pilgrimages without formal government supervision, but until 1993 the Ministry of the Interior supervised Islamic pilgrimages to Mecca (the Hajj).

During 1991 the Catholic Church began to operate community radio stations, first in Man and later in Abidjan and Yamoussoukro, but Muslim efforts to gain authorization to operate similar stations were unsuccessful until 1999, and Muslim organizations, unlike the Catholic Church, did not venture to operate unlicensed radio stations. Catholic and Protestant radio stations were given formal approval on March 30, 1999, after operating for months without official permission, and the Government granted authorization for an Islamic radio station on April 21, 1999.

The Government has taken positive steps to promote interfaith understanding. Catholics, Muslims, and Protestants have had their own religious programs on national television and radio for over 20 years. On significant Christian and Islamic holy days, national television often broadcasts films on the life of the founders of those religions. Government officials, including the President and his religious advisers, make a point of appearing at major religious celebrations and events organized by a wide variety of faiths and groups. There is no government-sponsored forum for interfaith dialog, but the Government often invites leaders of various religious communities (but not of traditional indigenous religious groups) to attend official ceremonies and to sit on deliberative and advisory committees.

Religious instruction is permitted in public schools and usually offered after normal class hours. Most such instruction is offered by established Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant groups.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government monitors minority religions, to the extent of registering them, but does not control them closely. However, some citizens are alarmed by the explosive proliferation of new groups. In his 1999 New Year's greetings, then-President Henri Konan Bedie advised the public to be wary of new groups that are not clearly identified and warned such groups against taking advantage of the country's tradition of tolerance to commit acts of fraud or manipulation. In general, the Government closely watches some religious groups, including Islamic associations and minority groups, for signs of political activity that it considers subversive but otherwise does not monitor them.

The Government does not prohibit links to foreign coreligionists but informally discourages connections with politically radical fundamentalist movements, such as Islamic groups based in Iran and Libya.

While not a direct restriction on religious freedom, some Muslims believe that they are discriminated against when applying for national identity cards. Due to the tense political situation in the country and the ethnic divisions along which political party lines are drawn, northern Muslims sometimes are scrutinized more closely in the identity card application process. As these northern Muslims share names, style of dress, and customs with several of the country's predominantly Muslim neighboring countries, they sometimes are accused wrongly of attempting to obtain illegally nationality cards in order to vote. Although this is not directly a result of their religious belief, this treatment creates a hardship for a disproportionate number of Muslims.

In December 1999, the new military regime requested that the Islamic Superior Council, an organization of imams that was seen as politically active and supportive of the previous regime, disband. The president of the council, Moustapha Diaby, did not oppose this demand, and the council ceased its operations. In March 2000, the Government allowed the council to resume its activities.

In May 2000, the military government warned the imam leaders of the Muslim community to refrain from political discourse in their sermons. The Government claimed the imams had been jeopardizing security with sermons that were too politically charged. In May and June 2000, during travels to various regions in the country, General Guei continually asked imams and other Muslim leaders to stay out of politics. In March 2000, local governments closed Harist churches to prevent an escalation of intrareligious violence (see Section II).

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the

Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the various religious communities are generally amicable. Once a year, on New Year's Eve, members of all Christian religious groups gather in the National Stadium in Abidjan to keep a nightlong vigil and pray. When serious social problems have arisen, simultaneous prayer ceremonies have been held in churches, temples, and mosques to ask for divine assistance. Kouassi-Datekro, a town in the Akan region in the eastern part of the country, is famous for ecumenical events involving simultaneous prayer services of all faiths. Since 1990 religious leaders from diverse groups have assembled on their own initiative to mediate in times of political conflict; however, no leaders of traditional indigenous religious groups have been included.

The religious group that feels most discriminated against is the largest group, the country's Islamic community. Societal attitudes are responsible for at least some of that feeling. Since the Islamic duty to give alms daily may attract beggars to neighborhoods containing mosques, some non-Muslims have opposed construction of mosques, such as the new mosque in Abidjan's plateau district. Some non-Muslims also find the muezzins' calls to prayer annoying. A few group all Muslims in a common category as foreigners, fundamentalists, or terrorists. Muslim citizens often are treated as foreigners by their fellow citizens, sometimes including government officials, because most Muslims are members of northern ethnic groups also found in other African countries from which there has been substantial immigration into the country.

Followers of traditional indigenous religions also are subject to societal discrimination. Many leaders of nontraditional religions, such as Christianity or Islam, look down on practitioners of traditional indigenous religions as pagans, practitioners of black magic, and practitioners of human sacrifice. Some Christians or Muslims refuse to associate with practitioners of traditional indigenous religions. The contents of traditional indigenous religions often are shrouded by secrecy mechanisms, such as exclusive initiation rites, oaths of silence, and taboos against writing down orally transmitted lore. However, there have been no reports of human sacrifice in the country since well before independence. Although the purported practice of black magic or witchcraft continues to be widely feared, it generally is discouraged by traditional indigenous religions, aspects of which commonly purport to offer protection from witchcraft. Traditional indigenous religions commonly involve belief in one supreme deity as well as lesser deities or spirits that are to be praised or appeased, some of whom may in some religions be believed to inhabit or otherwise be associated with particular places, natural objects, or man-made images.

However, many practitioners of traditional indigenous religions are unaware of societal discrimination and have not complained. The foremost proponent of "Bossonism," Jean Marie Adiaffi, died in 1999. He was organizing practitioners of traditional indigenous religions and demanding equal treatment for its religious leaders. No leader stepped forward to continue his work.

Conflicts between and within religious groups have surfaced occasionally. Members of the Limoudim of Rabbi Jesus, a small Christian group of unknown origin, have criticized and sometimes

attacked other Christian groups for allegedly failing to follow the teachings of Jesus. In 1992 a few members of the Limoudim group destroyed several Christian churches and tortured ministers in the Abobo district of Abidjan. They were tried and sentenced to 7 years' imprisonment but released in 1995 after receiving a presidential pardon. In January 1998, a conflict over land erupted between Catholics and Assembly of God members in the Yopougon district of Abidjan. The same area was the scene of a land conflict between Baptists and their neighbors in August 1998.

The Celestial Christians are divided because of a leadership struggle, as are the Harrists, who have come to blows on occasion. In March 2000, due to the internal struggle in the Harrist Church, clergy leader Barthelemy Akre Yasse struck Harrist National Committee president Tchotche Mel Felix from the church rolls for insubordination. This battle for church leadership at the national level led to violent confrontations between church members at the local level. Local governments, in order to prevent an escalation in the violence, closed Harrist churches in which the confrontations took place.

Prior to the coup, the Islamic leadership was fractured by disagreement between factions, two of which (the Superior Islamic Council and the Ouamma Islamic Front) were allied with the former ruling party, and two of which (the National Islamic Council and the Islamic Confederation for the Development of Cote d'Ivoire) were unaligned politically and had sought to create Islamic organizations that enjoy the same freedom from unofficial state oversight and guidance that Catholic organizations have long enjoyed. Following the overthrow of the Bedie government in December 1999, the organizations began to work together.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy has monitored and reported on the status of religious freedom, developed and maintained contacts with leaders of diverse religious groups, and discussed religious freedom issues with government officials in the overall context of the promotion of human rights.

In 1997 with financial assistance from the Embassy, the Research Group in Democracy and Social and Economic Development of Cote d'Ivoire (GERDDES-CI) helped religious groups in the country to establish a Forum of Religious Confessions. All the main religious groups participated in the forum: Catholics, Muslims, various Protestant groups, several syncretist religious groups, and the Association of Traditional Priests. The Forum continued to meet throughout the period covered by this report.

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