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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Congo, Democratic Republic of the

[Covers the period from July 1, 2008, to June 30, 2009]

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. However, there continued to be credible reports that families abandoned or abused persons, including children, accused of witchcraft or of being witches.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 905,000 square miles and a population of 68.7 million. The population is approximately 50 percent Roman Catholic, 20 percent mainline Protestant, 9 percent Kimbanguist, and 9 percent Muslim. Other religious groups represented in much smaller numbers include Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Orthodox Christians. The remainder generally practices indigenous religious beliefs.

Most religious groups are scattered throughout the country and are widely represented in cities and large towns. Muslims are mainly concentrated in the provinces of Maniema, Orientale, and Kinshasa. Members of the ethnically based spiritual and political movement Bundu dia Kongo (BDK) reside predominantly in Bas-Congo Province; BDK has never attempted to gain official recognition as a religious association.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all

levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Government observes Christmas as a national holiday.

A statutory order on the Regulation of Nonprofit Associations and Public Utilities provides for and regulates the establishment and operation of religious institutions. Requirements for the establishment of a religious organization are simple and generally are not subject to abuse. Exemption from taxation is among the benefits granted to recognized religious organizations. A law regulating religious organizations grants civil servants the power to recognize, suspend recognition of, or dissolve religious groups. Although the law requires officially recognized religious associations to maintain nonprofit status and respect the general public order, they are free to establish places of worship and train clergy.

A 2001 decree allows nonprofit organizations, including religious organizations, to operate without restriction provided they register with the Government by submitting a copy of their bylaws and constitution. The Government requires religious groups to be registered; however, in practice unregistered religious groups operated unhindered.

The Government requires foreign religious groups to obtain the approval of the President through the Minister of Justice; such groups generally operate without restriction once they receive approval.

Public schools permit religious instruction, and religious groups operate many public schools.

The National Media Regulatory Authority may suspend broadcast stations, religious or secular, for hate speech or calls for ethnic violence.

The Government regularly consulted with religious groups – including Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Kimbanguist, and Orthodox. The Consortium of Traditional Religious Leaders served as an informal forum for religious leaders to gather and discuss issues of concern.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Although the Government committed to a judicial investigation, there was no investigation into the police crackdown on the BDK in Bas-Congo in February and March 2008, where police reportedly killed at least 100 BDK adherents and razed BDK houses and temples.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country. However, the Government continued to hold Father Masirika, a Catholic priest, in prison in Kinshasa without trial on charges of participating in an insurrection movement.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. However, many families continued to accuse children and elderly persons of being witches and forced them from their homes.

As in past reporting periods, there were reports of incidents of individuals attacked, tortured, killed, or driven from their homes when they were accused of being witches. While "witch" is an imprecise term that is often applied to persons with developmental, behavioral, and psychological problems, there is a common belief that some persons have the power to cast spells on others or are possessed by demons. Such actions commonly follow a death that family members attribute to the work of a witch. Accusations of witchcraft can cause widespread fear in a community. For example, in September 2008 a fight broke out at a soccer match in Butembo, North Kivu Province, over allegations that players were using witchcraft. The fight spread to the stands, and after the police tried to intervene, 11 persons died in the resulting stampede.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.
