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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Rwanda

[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.

Local authorities continued to detain members of Jehovah's Witnesses who declined, for religious reasons, to participate in night patrols. Jehovah's Witnesses children were temporarily expelled from school for failure to sing the national anthem.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

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 10,169 square miles and a population of 10.4 million. Roman Catholics comprise 57 percent of the population, main line denomination Protestants 26 percent, Seventh-day Adventists 11 percent, and Muslims 5 percent. There are a growing number of Jehovah's Witnesses (approximately 15,000), evangelical Protestants, and Christian-linked schismatic religious groups. Other groups include indigenous religious practitioners and Baha'is.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Constitution prohibits the formation of political organizations based on race, ethnic group, tribe, clan, region, sex, religion, or any other division that may give rise to discrimination.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter, Assumption, Eid-al-Fitr, All Saints' Day, and Christmas.

The penal code provides for small fines and imprisonment of up to six months for anyone who interferes with a religious ceremony or with a religious minister in the exercise of his or her professional duties.

The law regulates public meetings and calls for fines or imprisonment for unauthorized public meetings, including assemblies for religious reasons. If a group is registered or their legal representatives are known to local authorities, no prior authorization for their meetings is required.

All nonprofit organizations, including churches and religious organizations, must register with the Ministry of Local Government and the Ministry of Justice to acquire legal status. Although authorities have not granted official legal status to any religious groups pending passage of a nongovernmental organization (NGO) law under consideration in Parliament since 2003, religious organizations receive "provisional authorization" by presenting their objectives and plans of action to local and district authorities. Some religious organizations therefore operated without full legal protection.

The Government requires religious groups to provide advance notification of religious meetings held at night, particularly those ceremonies involving amplified music and boisterous celebrations.

The Government requires religious groups to hold services at their established places of worship and bans the use of private homes for this purpose.

Government officials presiding over wedding ceremonies generally require couples to take an oath while touching the national flag, a practice that Jehovah's Witnesses object to on religious grounds. This practice makes it difficult for members to marry legally, since few officials are willing to perform the ceremony without the flag requirement. For some Jehovah's Witnesses, placing their hands on a Bible on top of the flag is an acceptable alternative.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

During the April 2009 memorial week commemorating the 1994 genocide, the Government limited the conduct of certain celebratory religious activities, including baptisms.

There continued to be tensions between the Government and the Catholic Church about the role of current and former church officials during the 1994 genocide.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Local authorities detained and imprisoned 17 Jehovah's Witnesses for a period of one night to one week during the reporting period for failure to participate – due to religious beliefs – in night patrols. The police publicly beat one of the Jehovah's Witnesses arrested in Nyagatare district. In 2005 judges ruled that no law required Jehovah's Witnesses to participate in night patrols.

Seventy Jehovah's Witnesses in Rwamagana and another 150 in Kibungo were detained by local authorities on two separate occasions in August 2008, despite having notified local officials of their planned events. Both groups were released without charge the next morning. There was one report of arrest of two Jehovah's Witnesses, who were held for four days in Nyanza, for failure to provide evidence of voting in the September legislative elections.

In July 2008 police briefly arrested 112 residents, including children, in Rusizi District for holding night prayers in a private home.

Seventy-six Jehovah's Witnesses children, many of whom were secondary school students, were expelled from school for failure to sing the national anthem during the reporting period. In January 2009 school officials began readmitting these expelled students, along with 42 of the 112 children expelled in the previous reporting period. Ninety-four children were back in school at the end of the reporting period.

In April 2008 school officials in certain districts fired 215 Jehovah's Witnesses teachers for not participating in government-sponsored "solidarity training." None of the teachers was reinstated.

At least 38 members of evangelical Christian groups were briefly detained for boycotting national identification card registration for religious reasons in September 2007. Most members subsequently agreed to register.

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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The number of Jehovah's Witnesses arrested for failure to participate in night patrols continued to decline in part because of government responsiveness to reports of Jehovah's Witnesses' detention by local authorities.

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, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Numerous associations and interfaith groups, such as the Ecumenical Council of Churches and the Protestant Council of Rwanda, contributed to understanding and tolerance among various religious groups. The Interfaith Commission for Rwanda supported programs aimed at reconciling genocide survivors, released genocide prisoners, and genocide detainees' families.

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.

Embassy officers held numerous meetings with members of the Catholic and Anglican Churches, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, leaders of the Muslim community, and evangelical Protestant groups to promote interfaith dialogue and discuss religious freedom. In addition, embassy officers regularly met with local and international NGOs involved in peace, justice, and reconciliation efforts that focus on religious tolerance and freedom. The Embassy raised individual cases of religious freedom violations with government officials, particularly concerning Jehovah's Witnesses.
