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U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Rwanda

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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

There were reports of local authorities detaining members of Jehovah's Witnesses, although fewer than in previous reporting periods. Government efforts to combat "genocide ideology" resulted in school officials firing 215 Jehovah's Witnesses who declined to attend or complete government-sponsored "solidarity" camps for religious reasons. Jehovah's Witnesses children were expelled from school in Gatsibo and Gisenyi districts 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 9 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 traditional indigenous religious practitioners and Baha'is.

Section II. Status of 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 Constitution includes a provision for a ceremonial oath of office for high-level government officials that references God.

The penal code provides for small fines and imprisonment of up to 6 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.

Authorities suspended national registration requirements for religious groups pending passage of a new nongovernmental organization (NGO) law that has been under consideration in Parliament since 2003. However, NGOs, religious institutions, and religious organizations must present their objectives and plan of action to local and district authorities for "provisional agreement." Some religious organizations operated without legal recognition, making them theoretically vulnerable to censorship and detention.

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

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

The Government observes Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Eid-al-Fitr, All Saints' Day, and Assumption as official

holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

During the April 2008 memorial week commemorating the 1994 genocide, the Government limited the conduct of certain celebratory religious activities, including baptisms.

In the fall of 2007 local police briefly detained nine members of the ADPR (Association des Eglises de Pentecôte au Rwanda) church in Nyagatare District after conducting nighttime outdoor prayer ceremonies without properly notifying authorities.

Government officials presiding over wedding ceremonies generally required couples to take an oath while touching the national flag, a practice that Jehovah's Witnesses objected to on religious grounds. This practice made it difficult for members to marry legally, since they had to find officials willing to perform the ceremony without the flag requirement. Some members found that placing their hands on a Bible on top of the flag was an acceptable alternative.

The Government ended the 2003 registration suspension of two local organizations, the United Methodist Church of Rwanda and the International Union Methodist Community. Both organizations registered with the Ministry of Local Government and the case before the courts was dropped.

The Government also ended the suspension of two Pentecostal churches led by foreign pastors.

Although there were no outward displays of animosity, there were 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 36 Jehovah's Witnesses for a period of 1 night to 1 week during the reporting period for failure to participate -- due to religious beliefs -- in night patrols. In 2005 judges ruled that no law required Jehovah's Witnesses to participate in night patrols.

Local authorities detained two Jehovah's Witnesses from April 9 to April 19, 2008, for not participating in a government-sponsored "solidarity" camp for teachers. The Minister of State for Education threatened to dismiss Jehovah's Witnesses teachers who declined to participate in the camps, or who left after initially attending the camps, for religious reasons. School officials in some districts subsequently fired 215 Jehovah's Witness teachers for not participating or completing training in the camps.

From February 2008 to the end of the reporting period, 98 Jehovah's Witnesses children were expelled from school for failure to sing the national anthem -- 5 in February in Gatsibo district, 31 in April from 7 districts, and 62 in May (47 of the 62 were expelled from schools in Gisenyi). Although 56 of the children were readmitted, most of the 62 children expelled in May had not been readmitted by the end of the reporting period. Six Jehovah's Witnesses children expelled during the previous reporting period in Nyamasheke District were readmitted after local Jehovah's Witnesses leaders engaged with government officials to resolve the issue.

On April 18, 2008, authorities arrested Catholic priest Edward Sentarure and sentenced him to 30 days in prison in Rulindo District for comments he made conducting Mass during the memorial period commemorating the 1994 genocide. He allegedly called for equal remembrance of the Hutus who died in the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the post-genocide insurgency, and quoted a traditional saying which was construed as denial of the genocide or suggesting there had been a "double genocide," which is prohibited by law.

During the ongoing national identification card registration process starting in September 2007, at least 38 members of evangelical Christian groups were briefly detained for boycotting national identification card registration in Bugasera, Nyagatare, and Gisagara districts, citing religious beliefs. In subsequent meetings with local officials, most members agreed to register, while the others faced criminal charges.

Father Jean-Marie Vianney Uwizeyeyezu, a Catholic priest, remained in prison on a 12-year sentence imposed in 2006 for "having downplayed the [1994] genocide."

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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The number of Jehovah's Witnesses arrested decreased from 48 to 36 during the reporting period and the

Government responded to reports of Jehovah's Witnesses' detention by local authorities and secured their release. Prohibitions on building of Jehovah's Witnesses' Kingdom Halls ceased and local authorities issued building permits without restrictions.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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 continued to promote unity and reconciliation by supporting activities such as aid programs aimed at reconciling genocide survivors, released genocide prisoners, and genocide detainees' families. Mufti Saleh Habimana, the leader of the country's Muslim community, participated in regional peace-building efforts for the Horn of Africa.

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. As part of its ongoing engagement with the Government on human rights issues, the Embassy identified individual cases of concern to government officials, who subsequently investigated conditions in a few local administrations and acted to improve the situation for members of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

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