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U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Latvia

International Religious Freedom Report 2002

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion; however, bureaucratic problems persist for some minority religions.

The generally amicable relations among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, lingering suspicions remain towards newer nontraditional faiths.

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. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 25,000 square miles, and its population is estimated at 2.4 million. The three largest faiths are Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Orthodox Christianity. No precise denomination membership statistics are available. Sizeable religious minorities include Baptists, Pentecostals, and various evangelical Protestant groups. The once large Jewish community was virtually destroyed in the Holocaust during the 1941-44 German occupation and now totals only an estimated 6,000 persons.

As of May 2002, the Justice Ministry had registered more than 1,000 congregations. This total included: Lutheran (309), Roman Catholic (251), Orthodox (114), Baptist (89), Old Believer Orthodox (67), Seventh-Day Adventist (46), Jehovah's Witnesses (10), Methodists (12), Jewish (7), Buddhist (4), Muslim (7), Hare Krishna (10), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) (3), and more than 100 others.

Interest in religion has increased markedly since independence. However, a large percentage of these adherents do not practice their faith regularly. Churches have provided the following estimates of church membership to the Justice Ministry: Lutherans (400,000), Roman Catholic (500,000), Orthodox (300,000), Baptist (6,000), Old Believer Orthodox (70,000), Seventh-Day Adventist (4,000), Jehovah's Witnesses (2,000), Methodists (500), Jewish (6,000), Buddhist (100), Muslim (300), Hare Krishna (500), and Mormons (2,000). There are significant numbers of atheists, perhaps a majority of the population. Orthodox Christians, many of them Russian-speaking, non-citizen, permanent residents, are concentrated in the major cities, while many Catholics live in the east.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom*Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. However, bureaucratic problems persist for some minority religions. There is no state religion; however, the Government distinguishes between "traditional" (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, Baptists, and Jewish) and "new" religions.

Although the Government does not require the registration of religious groups, the 1995 Law on Religious Organizations accords religious organizations certain rights and privileges when they register, such as status as a separate legal entity for owning property or other financial transactions, as well as tax benefits for donors. Registration also eases the rules for public gatherings.

According to the Law on Religious Organizations, any 10 citizens or permanent residents over the age of 18 may apply to register a church. Asylum seekers, foreign Embassy staff, and those in the country temporarily in a special status may not register a religious organization. Congregations functioning in the country for the first time that do not belong to a church association already registered must reregister each year for 10 years. Ten or more congregations of the same denomination and with permanent registration status may form a religious association. Only churches with religious association status may establish theological schools or monasteries. A decision to register a church is made by the Minister of

Justice. According to Ministry of Justice officials, most registration applications are approved eventually once proper documents are submitted; however, the law does not permit the simultaneous registration of more than one religious union (church) in a single confession, and the Government occasionally denies applications on this basis.

Property restitution has been completed substantially. The status of the remaining properties is unclear and is the subject of complicated legal and bureaucratic processes.

Citizens' passports indicate the ethnicity of the bearer. For example, Jews are considered an ethnic group and are listed as such rather than as Latvian or Russian.

December 25 is celebrated as Christmas and is a recognized national holiday. Good Friday and Easter Monday also are national holidays.

The Latvian Lutheran Church established its own clergy education center, the Luther Academy in Riga, in 1998. The Roman Catholic Church also has its own seminary. The University of Latvia's theological faculty is nondenominational.

There is a New Religions Consultative Council whose membership consists of doctors, academics, and the independent human rights ombudsman. The Council, which meets on an "ad hoc" basis, can research and write opinions on specific issues, but has no decision-making authority. There also is a Traditional Religion Council, which meets monthly. This body reportedly aims at facilitating greater ecumenical communication, discussing matters of common concern, and improving dialog between the traditional faiths and the Government.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Problems arise and registration is denied because the Law on Religious Organizations does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious union (church) in a single confession, and the Government occasionally denies groups registration. Because of this provision, the Government does not register any splinter groups, including an independent Jewish congregation, the Latvian Free Orthodox Church, and a separate Old Believers group.

Visa regulations effective since 1999 require religious workers to present either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a Latvian bachelor's degree in theology. The visa application process still is cumbersome. While the Government generally was cooperative in assisting to resolve difficult visa cases in favor of missionary workers, problems still persist. In June 2002, an American religious worker successfully appealed a visa denial; however, that decision later was overturned through a government appeal.

Foreign evangelists and missionaries, including from the United States, are permitted to hold meetings and to proselytize, but the law stipulates that only domestic religious organizations may invite them to conduct such activities. Foreign religious denominations have criticized this provision.

The Law on Religious Organizations stipulates that religion may be taught to students in public schools on a voluntary basis only by representatives of Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believer, Baptist, and Jewish religions. The Government provides funds for this education. Students at state-supported national minority schools also may receive education on the religion "characteristic of the national minority" on a voluntary basis. Other denominations may provide religious education in private schools only.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

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.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the various religious communities are generally amicable. Ecumenism still is a new concept in the country, and traditional religions have adopted a distinctly reserved attitude towards the concept. Although government officials encourage a broader understanding of and acceptance of newer religions, suspicions remain towards newer nontraditional faiths.

The Latvian Historical Commission, under the sponsorship of President Vaira Vike-Freiberga, has continued to promote Holocaust awareness throughout all elements of Society. In December 2001, President Vike-Freiberga dedicated a memorial to Holocaust victims in a Riga suburb.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy worked to support the principle of religious freedom by engaging in regular exchanges with appropriate government bodies, including the Director of the Office of Religious Affairs, human rights nongovernmental organizations, and representatives of various religious confessions, including missionaries. The Embassy's Consular Section also held regular discussions with local immigration authorities and section meetings with the Department of Religious Affairs.

The Embassy actively supports the Latvian Historical Commission. It has funded the travel of Latvian scholars to the United States for education in ethnic and religious tolerance and of U.S. experts to Latvia for Historical Commission activities. The Embassy also sponsored a series of academic exchanges and lectures on Holocaust issues.

Embassy officials maintain an open and productive dialog with the Government's Director of the Office of Religious Affairs. Embassy officials also meet regularly with visiting missionary groups as well as representatives of different religious confessions, both Latvian and foreign. Problems that members of certain minority religions have experienced at the Citizenship and Migration Department when seeking visas and residency permits often are discussed. For example, in June 2002, an American religious worker successfully appealed a visa denial; however, that decision later was overturned through a government appeal. The Embassy was working with the Government to resolve this issue at the end of the period covered by this report.

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