U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Mongolia

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MONGOLIA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion, the right both to worship and not to worship, and explicitly recognizes the separation of church and state. The Government generally respects these provisions in practice; however, some groups that sought to register have faced bureaucratic harassment.

Although there is no official state religion, traditionalists believe that Buddhism is the "natural religion" of the country. The Government has contributed to the restoration of several Buddhist sites. These are important religious, historical, and cultural centers. The Government does not subsidize the Buddhist religion otherwise.

Under the provisions of a 1993 law on relations between church and state, the Government may supervise and limit the numbers of both places of worship and clergy for organized religions, but there were no reports that it has done so. However, religious groups must register with the Ministry of Justice. The Government closed some Christian and Baha'i places of worship for failing to register properly. Some groups encountered harassment during the registration process, including random demands by midlevel city officials for financial contribution in return for securing legal status. Even when registration was completed, the same authorities threatened some religious groups with withdrawal of approval. The registration process is decentralized with several layers of bureaucracy; some groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, were in the registration process in spring 1999. Additionally, registration in the capital may not be sufficient if a group intends to work in the countryside where local registration also is necessary. In general it appears that difficulties in registering are primarily the consequence of bureaucratic action by local officials and attempts to extort financial assistance for projects not funded by the city.

Buddhism and Mongolian traditions are tied together closely, and it appears likely that almost all ethnic Mongolians (93 percent of the population) practice some form of Buddhism. Lamaist Buddhism of the Tibetan variety is the traditional and dominant religion, but this circumstance does not adversely affect religious freedom for others. Since the end of Socialist controls on religion and Mongolian traditions in 1990, active interest in and practice of Buddhism has grown. The Buddhist community is not completely homogenous, and there are several competing schools, including a small

group that believes that the sutras should be in the Mongolian language and that all religious clergy should be Mongolian. However, the rivalry between the schools has not affected religious freedom, nor is it a matter of public concern.

Kazakhs are the largest of the ethnic minorities, and the population of the western province, Bayan-Olgiy, is approximately 85 percent Kazakh, most of whom are practicing Muslims. The Kazakhs freely worship and run Islamic schools for their children. They sometimes receive financial assistance from religious organizations in Kazakhstan and Turkey. Their status as a majority in Bayan-Olgiy was established in the former Socialist period and continues in much the same circumstances.

With the opening of the country following the 1990 democratic changes, religious groups began to arrive to provide humanitarian assistance and open new churches. Some friction between missionary groups and citizens developed because assistance was mixed with proselytizing activities. Proselytizing by registered religious groups is allowed, although a Ministry of Education directive bans mixing foreign language or other training with religious teaching or instruction. The edict is enforced, particularly in the capital area. Contacts with coreligionists outside the country are allowed.

Foreign missionaries include Roman Catholics, various evangelical Protestant groups, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, and adherents of the Baha'i Faith. Some of these groups are still in the process of registering with the Ministry of Justice; the process is protracted for some groups, but others are registered quickly. In the first half of 1999, two new churches were opened in Ulaanbaatar. The religious groups are being granted the right to hold church services and have their own church buildings in addition to operating charitable institutions.

There are no government-sponsored ecumenical activities.

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.

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 amicable, but there are no significant ecumenical movements or interfaith dialog. Citizens generally are tolerant of the beliefs of others, and there are no reports of religiously motivated violence, although there has been some friction between missionary groups and citizens because assistance was mixed with proselytizing activity (see Section I).

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. Embassy officials have discussed with midlevel bureaucrats specific registration difficulties encountered by Christian churches. These discussions focused attention on U.S. concern for religious freedom and opposition to corruption; they resulted in a clarification of the requirements for registration.

U.S. Embassy representatives also have met with Buddhist leaders, usually in courtesy calls associated with visits by U.S. delegations. Additionally, embassy officials have met with the Dalai Lama's regional representative and representatives of U.S.-based religious and humanitarian organizations. The Embassy also maintains contact with the staff of the local office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to discuss human rights and religious freedom.

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