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2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Papua New Guinea

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
U.S. Department of State, September 5, 2000

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Both government policy and the generally amicable relationship among religions in society contribute to the free practice of religion.

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. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

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

The predominance of Christianity is recognized in the preamble of the Constitution, which refers to "our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours." Nevertheless, the Constitution's provisions for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion have consistently been interpreted to mean that any religion may be practiced or propagated as long as it does not interfere with the freedom of others. The population largely belongs to various Christian churches. Many Christian denominations and some non-Christian groups meet and preach freely in the country, and there is a high level of regular participation in group worship and religious activities. However, many citizens combine their Christian faith with some pre-Christian traditional indigenous practices.

Religious Demography

According to the 1990 census, the churches with the largest number of members are the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the United Church, the Evangelical Alliance, and the Seventh-Day Adventists. At that time, 97 percent of citizens identified themselves as members of a Christian church. Less than 0.3 percent identified themselves as non-Christian, and less than 3 percent identified themselves as having no religion.

The mainstream churches are those that proselytized on the island of New Guinea in the 19th century. Initially, colonial governments assigned different missions to different geographic areas. Since territory in Papua New Guinea is synonymous with language group and ethnicity, this policy led to the identification of certain churches with certain ethnic groups. However, as the country's economy modernized and populations became more mobile, churches of all denominations moved with them, and churches of major denominations are now found in all parts of the country.

Nonmainstream Christian churches and non-Christian religious groups are active throughout the country as well. According to the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches, recently both Muslim and Confucian missionaries have become active.

Immigrants and noncitizens are free to practice their religion. The Muslim community has a mosque in the capital of Port Moresby. In general the Government does not subsidize the practice of religion. The Department of Family and Church Affairs has a nominal policymaking role that until recently has been confined to reiterating the Government's respect for church autonomy. In late 1999, a privately-sponsored bill was introduced in Parliament that proposed to replace the existing Council of Churches with a National Council of Christian Churches, the leadership of which would be appointed by the Minister for Family and Church Affairs and which would be funded by the Government. The churches did not support the bill, and it was not adopted.

However, most of the schools and many of the health services in the country were built and continue to be run by the churches, and the Government provides support for those institutions. At independence the Government recognized that it had neither the funds nor the human capital with which to take over these institutions and agreed to subsidize their operations on a per pupil/per patient basis. The Government also pays the salaries of national teachers and health staff. In recent years, although the education and health infrastructures continue to rely heavily on church-run institutions, some have closed periodically because they did not receive the promised government support. These problems are due in part to endemic financial management problems in the Government.

It is the policy of the Department of Education to set aside 1 hour a week for religious instruction in the public schools. Church representatives teach the lessons, and the students attend the class run by the church of their choice. Children whose parents do not wish them to attend the classes are excused.

Foreign missionary activity is high. The Pentecostal Church particularly has made inroads into the congregations of the more established churches, but nearly every conceivable movement and faith that proselytizes has representatives in the country. The Summer Institute of Linguistics is an important missionary institution; it translates the New Testament into native languages.

The Roman Catholic Church is the only mainstream church that still relies to a large extent on foreign clergy.

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.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

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

There are generally amicable relations between the various religious communities.

As new missionary movements proliferate, representatives of some established churches and some individuals have questioned publicly whether such activity is socially desirable. Some persons have proposed legislation to limit such activity. However, the courts and government practice have upheld the constitutional right to freedom of speech, thought, and belief, and no legislation to curb those rights has ever been adopted. For example, when the Muslim community applied to the Land Board for permission to acquire property on which to build a mosque, some churches objected, citing Papua New Guinea's historical character as a Christian country. Nevertheless, permission to acquire the land was granted.

The Papua New Guinea Council of Churches makes the only effort at interfaith dialog. The Council members consist of the Anglican, Gutnius and Union Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran and United churches, and the Salvation Army. In addition, it has 15 parareligious organizations, like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), which participate in its activities. However, the Council has only Christian affiliates. The Council is self-financing. The ecumenical work of the Council of Churches is confined primarily to cooperation between churches on social welfare projects.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy engages the Government on a wide range of human rights issues, including religious freedom. The Ambassador continued discussions with the Council of Churches and individual church leaders throughout the period covered by this report. The Ambassador and the Embassy's consular officer visit regularly with U.S. citizen missionaries of all denominations.

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