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Liberia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

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 43,000 square miles and a population of 3.7 million.

According to the 2008 National Population and Housing Census, Christians represent 85.5 percent of the population, Muslims 12.2 percent, adherents of indigenous religious beliefs 0.5 percent, and other religions 0.1 percent, with 1.5 percent claiming no religion. There are small numbers of Bahais, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists. Many members of religious groups practice elements of indigenous religious beliefs. Christian groups include Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and AME Zion denominations, and a variety of Pentecostal churches. Many of the churches are affiliated with churches outside the country, while others are independent.

Christians reside throughout the country. Muslims belong mainly to the Mandingo ethnic group, which also resides throughout the country, and the Vai ethnic group, which lives predominantly in the west. The country is also home to a

Fula community that is predominantly Muslim. Ethnic groups in all regions participate in the indigenous religious practices of secret societies, such as the Poro (for men) and Sande (for women). Secret societies teach traditional customs and skills to initiate youth into adulthood. In some cases, Sande societies practice female genital mutilation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The law does not discriminate based on religion regarding citizenship and residency, but there were allegations that applications for citizenship and residency from Mandingos and Fulas received greater scrutiny than those from members of other indigenous tribes because of fears that they may be illegal entrants from neighboring Guinea.

High-level government officials are required to take an oath when assuming their new offices. Christians kissed the Bible and Muslims the Qur'an on those occasions.

Government ceremonies opened and closed with prayers. The prayers were usually Christian but occasionally were both Christian and Muslim.

All organizations, including non-indigenous religious groups, must register their articles of incorporation with the government, along with their organizations' statements of purpose. Registration was routine, and there were no reports that the registration process was burdensome or discriminatory. The government did not require indigenous religious groups to register, and they generally did not.

Public schools offered religious education, particularly Christian education, but did not require it. The government subsidized private schools, most of which were affiliated with either Christian or Muslim organizations.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Fast and Prayer Day and Christmas. Some Muslim leaders believe that certain Islamic holy days should also be national holidays. The government mandated that public businesses and markets, including Muslim businesses and shops, remain closed on Sundays and Christmas, an issue that Muslim leaders in the past brought unsuccessfully to the National Legislature and the Supreme Court. There was no legal requirement to excuse Muslims from employment or classes for Friday prayers, although some employers did so.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees, in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Because ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

A suspected ritualistic killing of a Christian girl whose body was found near a mosque in Lofa County on February 26 led to rioting in and around Voinjama, the county seat, between predominantly Christian Lormas and predominantly Muslim Mandingos, resulting in four deaths and numerous injuries. Religious sites targeted and damaged included two mosques, three churches, and a Catholic school.

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Friction between the Lormas and Mandingos in Lofa County continued in the aftermath of the February 26 violence. On September 17, the government publicly disclosed the so-called "Dubai Letter" which, translated from the original Arabic into English, supposedly cast Lofa Christians as "pagans" and investigators of the February violence as anti-Islam and anti-Muslim. The letter, allegedly written by a Liberian Muslim leader, was addressed to an individual in Dubai to solicit funds to support Muslim victims of the earlier violence. The government's release of the letter was intended to signal the continuing tensions between Lofa Christians and Muslims and serve as a reminder to both groups to work constructively toward peace. However the letter, coupled with the September 18 arrest of a Mandingo youth and purported ring leader of the February violence, further fueled tensions. A week later there were false rumors of Mandingo youths rampaging in Voinjama that resulted in the closure of schools and businesses.

There were reports of ritualistic killings (the act of killing for body parts for use in traditional rituals) from all parts of the country. The government treated ritualistic killings as homicides and investigated and prosecuted them accordingly; however, lack of community cooperation and credible witnesses generally hampered investigations.

The Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL) promoted dialogue among various religious communities. The IRCL has an office in Lofa County that continued to work specifically on interreligious and interethnic issues. The vice president, in collaboration with government and nongovernmental organizations, organized a dispute resolution workshop for traditional leaders in Lofa County.

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.

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