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Congo, Democratic Republic of the

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND LABOR

Although there was no constitution in effect during the period covered by this report, the Government generally respected freedom of religion in practice, provided that worshipers neither disturbed public order nor contradicted commonly held morals. Unlike in the period covered by the previous report, there were no reports of government soldiers committing abuses in government-controlled territory. There were reports of abuses by rebel troops in territories not controlled by the Government.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom in government-controlled areas during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. However, in areas of the country under the military occupation of Rwanda and the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) rebel groups, respect for religious freedom continued to be poor. Before Rwanda officially announced on September 21, 2002, that it had withdrawn its troops to Rwanda, credible reports indicated that Rwandan troops and Rwandan-backed RCD troops based in Goma (RCD/Goma) deliberately targeted churches and religious leaders in the towns and villages under their control. These actions were believed to be part of an attempt to intimidate and control communities and leaders who opposed the Rwandan presence in the country; there was no apparent religious motivation. Unlike during the period covered by the previous report, violence and banditry in Bunia, Beni and Butembo, although continuing, did not target churches or religious groups.

There was a generally amicable relationship among religions in society. However, there continued to be credible reports that a significant number of children were accused of witchcraft and abandoned by their families. There has been a decrease in the number of incidents reported in which persons suspected of witchcraft were attacked, tortured, killed, or driven from their homes.

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 905,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 52 million. Approximately 55 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 25 percent is Protestant, and 2.5 percent is Muslim. The remainder largely practice traditional indigenous religions. There are no statistics available on the percentage of atheists. Minority religious groups include, among others, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

There are no reliable data on active participation in religious services. Ethnic and political differences generally are not linked to religious differences.

Foreign missionaries operate within the country.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

Although there was no constitution in effect during the period covered by this report, the Government generally respected freedom of religion in practice, provided that worshipers neither disturbed public order nor contradicted commonly held morals. Unlike the period covered by the previous report, there were no reports of government forces restricting religious freedom. There is no state religion.

The establishment and operation of religious institutions is provided for and regulated through a statutory order on the Regulation of Non-profit Associations and Public Utility Institutions. Requirements for the establishment of a religious organization are simple and generally are not subject to abuse. Exemption from taxation is among the benefits granted to religious organizations. A 1971 law regulating religious organizations grants civil servants the power to recognize, suspend recognition of, or dissolve religious groups. There have been no reports that the Government suspended or dissolved a religious group since 1990, when the Government suspended its recognition of Jehovah's Witnesses; that suspension subsequently was reversed by a court. Although the law restricts the process of recognition, officially recognized religions are free to establish places of worship and to train clergy.

The Government requires practicing religious groups to be registered; however, in practice unregistered religious groups operate unhindered.

Although the Government requires foreign religious groups to obtain the approval of the President through the Minister of Justice, foreign religious groups generally operate without restriction once they receive approval from the Government. Many recognized churches have external ties, and foreign missionaries generally are allowed to proselytize. The Government generally did not interfere with foreign missionaries.

The Government promoted interfaith understanding by supporting and consulting with the country's five major religious groups (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Muslim, and Kimbanguist). The Consortium of Traditional Religious Leaders serves as a forum for religious leaders to gather and discuss issues of concern, and it advises and counsels the Government while presenting a common moral and religious front.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In 1999 former President Laurent Kabila promulgated a decree that restricted the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including religious organizations, by establishing requirements for them; however, existing religious organizations were exempt, and the decree subsequently was not enforced. In 2001 President Joseph Kabila issued a decree that allows nonprofit organizations, including religious organizations, to operate without restriction provided they register with the Government by submitting copies of their bylaws and constitution.

While the Government generally did not interfere with foreign missionaries, foreign missionaries have not been exempt from general restrictions by security forces, such as freedom of movement imposed on all persons by security force members who erect and man roadblocks, at which they often solicit bribes.

The Government banned the group "Bundu dia Kongo" on the basis of its separatist political beliefs. On July 15, 2002, 45 of the leaders of the group in 7 localities were arrested and imprisoned. Of the 45, 4 subsequently died in prison of "illness." On April 24, the remaining 41 were released. Although the group has both religious and political beliefs, the group was banned and members were jailed for their political beliefs.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Unlike the period covered by the previous report, there were no reports of religious officials being abused or religious property destroyed in government-controlled territory in the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees, excepting the "Bundu dia Kongo," in government-controlled areas.

The ongoing war broke out in 1998 between the Government and rebel forces; by the end of the period covered by this report, rebel forces backed by Rwanda and Uganda continued to control more than half of the country. The Government exercises no authority in areas east and north of the disengagement line. In areas of the country that were under the military occupation of Rwanda, respect for religious freedom was poor; in areas that continue to be under the occupation of Rwanda's respective rebel clients, respect for religious freedom continued to be poor. RCD/Goma rebels and their Rwandan allies continued to commit significant abuses in these areas. Credible reports indicate that RCD/Goma and Rwandan troops deliberately targeted churches and religious leaders in the towns and villages under their control. Such actions were believed to be part of an attempt to intimidate the population and retaliate for the growing role of churches as the only safe zones for community discussion and peaceful activism against the presence of Rwandan and RCD/Goma forces in the country. Abuses took the form of arbitrary killings, arrests, and disappearances of pastors, priests, and laymen; public threats against the lives of religious leaders; pillaging and destruction of church property; and the use of armed soldiers to disperse forcibly religious services.

On May 10, 10 tribal militiamen attacked the parish of Nyakasanza in Bunia, killing 14 people and looting and destroying the parish; the dead included 2 priests, Father Aime Ndjabu and Father Francis Mateseso. Four days prior to the attack, Father Raphael Ngona was also killed in Bunia. No further information is available and the attacks appear to have been politically or ethnically motivated, not on religious grounds.

On April 6, 12 people were killed in an attack on Bukavu by fighters from a local militia known as Mudundu 40. RCD/Goma and Rwandan Patriotic Front soldiers reacted by attacking Mushinga and Burhale, killing 60 people and destroying churches, parishes and schools.

On July 20, 2002, Bunda dia Kongo followers reportedly clashed with police in Louzi and Moanda; 10 of the demonstrators in Luozi and 4 in Moanda were killed, and numerous others were injured by gunshot. One policeman reportedly also was killed.

There were several incidents of abuse in the RCD/Goma controlled territory in 2000. In May 2002, bodyguards of the RCD/Goma's 13th Brigade Commander Mwilambwe beat two priests and two Catholic laymen in the presence of RCD/Goma Deputy Director of Security and Information Bampa, who had ordered the beatings. Mwilambwe reportedly told the victims that the beatings were in response to Catholic criticism of the RCD/Goma.

In May 2002, in Kisangani, troops from the RCD/Goma and the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) seized Xavier Zabalo, a Spanish Jesuit priest, transferred him to several different detention locations, and pillaged his parish and personal home; Zabalo was released 24 hours later following strong international pressure. Also in May, RCD/Goma and RPA forces in

Kisangani seized and beat Guy Verhaegen, a Belgian Catholic priest, who later required hospitalization for his injuries.

In May 2002, RCD/Goma Brigade Commander Eric Ruhorimbere issued a public statement that accused the clergy in North Katanga Province of "misleading" the public through their preaching. The statement, which was delivered in the presence of the RCD Governor and Vice Governor of North Katanga, included a death threat against the clergy.

In April 2002, in Bukavu, Rwandan and RCD/Goma soldiers surrounded the congregations of several Catholic churches and forcibly dispersed, beat, and kicked parishioners. The Catholic Church in Bukavu originally had organized a Mass at which Catholics from all parishes in South Kivu Province were to assemble and pray for peace. Although the Catholic Church had applied for and received permission from the Mayor of Bukavu and the Vice Governor of South Kivu Province to hold the Mass, Rwandan and RCD/Goma soldiers announced on the radio that the Mass was forbidden. During the broadcast, RCD/Goma Commander Chuma Balumisa issued threats against the Catholic Church, specific priests, including Monseigneur Maroyi, and anyone who participated in the Mass. The Catholic Church cancelled the Mass and told parishioners to pray instead at their local parishes. On the morning of April 12, Rwandan forces armed with guns and RCD/Goma soldiers and police armed with batons surrounded the main religious centers in each parish and lined the main roads in Bukavu. In the Cahi Parish, soldiers entered the church, beat parishioners and priests, and destroyed the statue outside the Church. In Nyamwera Parish, Rwandan soldiers used tear gas to disperse a group of young students. In Mater Dei of Muhungu Parish, soldiers chased parishioners from their church, beat them, and fired shots in the air. Soldiers at the same parish violently kicked a group of children between the ages of 8 and 12 who were marching toward the church chanting, "We ask for peace." Numerous persons were injured, including two priests, a 14-year-old girl, and a 17-year-old boy.

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

Although there is a generally amicable relationship among religions in society, there continued to be credible reports that significant numbers of children throughout the country were accused of being witches and then driven from their homes by their families. Accusations of child sorcery can be made when death, disease, or unemployment strikes the home. Some of the accused children who are not abandoned reportedly are taken to special religious groups to undergo exorcisms. During the exorcisms children may be locked in boxes for long periods of time, starved for several days, or receive other harsh treatments. No further information was available at the end of the period covered by this report.

There has been a decrease in the number of incidents reported in which persons suspected of witchcraft were attacked, tortured, killed, or driven from their homes. In June 2001, in Orientale Province, there were reports of witch hunts that resulted in the killing of several hundred persons; more than 150 persons were arrested for suspected involvement by the end of 2001. The local population targeted the victims because they suspected and feared that they were casting spells on others. There is a common belief in the region that some persons have the power to cast spells on others; this fear sometimes rises to mass hysteria. No further information was available at the end of the period covered by this report.

In April 2002, unidentified persons shot and killed Catholic priest Romain Kahindo Kyavuyirwe while he was driving in an area controlled by RCD/ML rebels. A local human rights group believed the attack to be a result of the general state of violence in the area, rather than a deliberate targeting of religious leaders.

In March 2002, in Goma, unidentified persons threw a hand grenade into a Catholic religious procession; 1 priest and 2 children were killed, and 11 persons, including 3 priests, were injured. The RCD/Goma investigation, which was viewed as not credible, placed responsibility for the incident on human rights activists and U.N. personnel; RCD/Goma forces subsequently arrested at least six human rights activists. The motivation for the attack was believed to be political, rather than religious. No further information was available at the end of the period covered by this report.

Leaders of major religions consult with one another through the Consortium of Traditional Religious Leaders.

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 the promoting human rights.

On numerous occasions, the U.S. Government continued to voice its opposition to the presence of hostile foreign troops in the country. The U.S. Government also publicly criticized the war and launched a number of diplomatic initiatives, in concert with the U.N., to bring the conflict to an end.

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