



EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES

SKOPJE - MACEDONIA

2007 Report on International Religious Freedom

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
September 14, 2007

Preface

Why the Reports are Prepared

This report is submitted to the Congress by the Department of State in compliance with Section 102(b) of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. The law provides that the Secretary of State, with the assistance of the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, shall transmit to Congress "an Annual Report on International Religious Freedom supplementing the most recent Human Rights Reports by providing additional detailed information with respect to matters involving international religious freedom."

How the Reports are Prepared

U.S. embassies prepare the initial drafts of these reports, gathering information from a variety of sources, including government and religious officials, nongovernmental organizations, journalists, human rights monitors, religious groups, and academics. This information-gathering can be hazardous, and U.S. Foreign Service Officers regularly go to great lengths, under trying and sometimes dangerous conditions, to investigate reports of human rights abuse, to monitor elections, and to come to the aid of individuals at risk because of their religious beliefs.

The Office of International Religious Freedom collaborated in collecting and analyzing information for the country reports, drawing on the expertise of other Department of State offices, religious organizations, other non-governmental organizations, foreign government officials, representatives from the United Nations and other international and regional organizations and institutions, and experts from academia and the media. In compiling and editing the country reports, the Office of International Religious Freedom consulted with experts on issues of religious discrimination and persecution, religious leaders from a wide variety of faiths, and experts on legal matters. The office's guiding principle was to

ensure that all relevant information was assessed as objectively, thoroughly, and fairly as possible.

The report will be used by a wide range of U.S. government departments, agencies, and offices to shape policy; conduct diplomacy; inform assistance, training, and other resource allocations; and help determine which countries have engaged in or tolerated "particularly severe violations" of religious freedom, otherwise known as Countries of Particular Concern.

A Word on Usage

When this report states that a government "generally respected" the right of religious freedom over the reporting period, this phrase signifies that the government attempted to protect religious freedom in the fullest sense. "Generally respected" is thus the highest level of respect for religious freedom assigned by this report. The phrase "generally respected" is used because the protection and promotion of religious freedom is a dynamic endeavor; it cannot be stated categorically that any government fully respected this right over the reporting year, even in the best of circumstances.

Acknowledgements

The 2007 report covers the period from July 1, 2006, to June 30, 2007, and reflects a year of dedicated effort by hundreds of Foreign Service and Civil Service Officers in the Department of State and U.S. missions abroad. We thank the many Foreign Service Officers at our embassies and consulates abroad for monitoring and promoting religious freedom, and for chronicling in detail the status of religious liberty. In addition to their efforts, we acknowledge the diligent labor and tireless commitment to religious freedom of those within the Office of International Religious Freedom whose work made this report possible: Clarissa Adamson, Julia Becker, Judson Birdsall, Mary Anne Borst, Sandra Bunn-Livingstone, Cierra Burnett, Barbara Cates, Warren Cofsky, A. Jack Croddy, Doug Dearborn, Lauren Diekman, Augustine Fahey, Carrie Flinchbaugh, Maureen Gaffney, Albert Gombis, Noel Hartley, Caitlin Helfrich, Nancy Hewett, Olivia Hilton, Victor Huser, Emilie Kao, Justin Kern, Stephen Liston, Kathryn Lurie, Gwendolyn Mack, Courtney Magill, Safia Mohamoud, Joannella Morales, Aaron Pina, Danielle Polebaum, David Rodearmel, Deborah Schneider, Suzanne Sittichai, Rebecca Struwe, H. Knox Thames, and Gilberto Torresvela. The work of all of these individuals advances the cause of freedom, ensures accuracy in our reporting, and brings hope to repressed people around the world.

Introduction

"The freedom to worship is so central to America's character that we tend to take it personally when that freedom is denied to others. Our country was a leading voice on behalf of the Jewish refuseniks in the Soviet Union. Americans joined in common cause with Catholics and Protestants who prayed in secret behind the Iron Curtain. America has stood with Muslims seeking to freely practice their beliefs in places such as Burma and China."

--President George W. Bush, June 27, 2007

Our founding fathers established religious liberty as the cornerstone of America's constitutional system by enshrining it in the First Amendment of our Bill of Rights. Many of our nation's early settlers fled religious persecution to come to America; hence they vividly understood the importance of religious freedom.

Hanging over one of the main entrances to the U.S. Department of State is a mural that vividly captures this commitment. The 50-by-12 foot painting by Kindred McLeary represents the freedoms of worship, speech, assembly, and the press (a portion of the mural is highlighted on the cover of this year's Report materials). The mural was completed in 1942 at the height of one of the most challenging periods in the history of our country. The mural serves today as a potent reminder that, even at times of great national challenge and threat, the heart of our foreign policy encompasses the protection and promotion of fundamental freedoms, starting with freedom of worship.

The United States is not alone in this commitment to religious freedom. The international community has repeatedly declared that freedom of religion is a fundamental human right. Such declarations can be found in Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 16 of the Vienna Concluding Document of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Article 12 of the American Declaration of Human Rights of the Organization of American States, and Article 9 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of the Council of Europe.

The UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is particularly noteworthy, as it made binding the aspirational rights highlighted in the Universal Declaration. Article 18 declares, "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching." Article 18 of the Covenant goes on to state that "No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice."

Unfortunately, as individuals and communities struggle for religious freedom many governments ignore their international obligations. In too many countries, governments refuse to recognize and protect religious freedom, and millions suffer as a result. In some cases, religious believers are imprisoned or physically abused, simply for the courage of their convictions. In others, they are denied the freedom to choose their faith or talk about it openly. One contemporary example of a threat to this freedom is a trend of new laws that, ironically, in the name of tolerance, bars discussion of varied religious viewpoints within a religion or between varying belief systems.

In response to these and other threats to free religious practice, the U.S. Congress in 1998 passed the International Religious Freedom Act. The Act reaffirmed that it is the policy of the United States to "condemn violations of religious freedom, and to promote, and to assist other governments in the promotion of, the fundamental right to freedom of religion." Most importantly, the Act declares the United States will stand for liberty and stand with the persecuted.

The Act established the Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF Office) in the U.S. Department of State and mandated the publication of the *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom*. This Report covers the entire world and is the most comprehensive catalogue of both religious freedom abuses and of improvements with respect to this fundamental right. The final product represents countless hours of investigation, documentation, and analysis by U.S. embassies and consulates abroad and by IRF Office staff in Washington. Because of this meticulous work and its broad coverage, the *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom* is read by both the powerful and the powerless, by the victims of religious persecution and by those with the ability to remedy such abuse.

The International Religious Freedom Act also mandated the creation of an Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, who acts as principal adviser to both the President and the Secretary of State on advancing religious freedom worldwide. The Ambassador's role, supported by the IRF Office and in concert with other U.S. officials, is to provide a voice for the voiceless and the oppressed. I and my staff engage governments, be they ally or adversary, to raise concerns across the full range of religious freedom violations. We also work within our government to help ensure U.S. foreign policy reflects our country's historic commitment to religious freedom.

Thankfully, our nation and the Department of State are led by individuals with a deep commitment to this issue. Both President Bush and Secretary of State Rice have done much to promote religious freedom around the world. The Congress has also been a steadfast ally in highlighting abuses and encouraging improvements in many nations. Non-governmental organizations and religious groups are also valued partners in our work. This ninth edition of the *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom* is a testament to the commitment of our leaders and citizens to this issue.

The *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom* is a natural outgrowth of our country's history and a current reflection of our values. As Secretary of State Rice has said, "We are mindful that too many people of faith can only whisper to God in the silent sanctuaries of their conscience, because they fear persecution for their religious beliefs." She concludes, "Government simply has no right to stand between the individual and the Almighty."

Great strides have been made to protect religious freedoms, both in the United States and around the world. Sadly, however, too many individuals are unable to exercise their religious liberties and suffer, sometimes under great duress and violence, for their faith. It is this knowledge that drives our work on this Annual Report and that inspires our dedication to work towards the day when all persons enjoy this cherished human right.

John V. Hanford III, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom

Executive Summary

The Annual Report

The purpose of this report on religious freedom is to document the actions of governments—those that repress religious expression, persecute innocent believers, or tolerate violence against religious minorities, as well as those that respect, protect, and

promote religious freedom. We strive to report with fairness and accuracy on abuses against adherents of all religious traditions and beliefs. The governments we report on range from those that provided a high level of protection for religious freedom in the broadest sense (those that "generally respected" religious freedom) to totalitarian regimes that sought to control religious thought and expression and regarded some or all religious groups as threats.

The promotion of religious freedom is a core objective of U.S. foreign policy and is part of the U.S. Department of State's mission. The commitment of the United States to religious freedom and to international human rights standards is also articulated in such documents as Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which clearly states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. As an expression of our deep national commitment to these freedoms, the Department of State monitors religious persecution and discrimination worldwide, recommends and implements policies directed toward regions and countries, and develops programs to promote religious freedom. Through transformational diplomacy, the United States seeks to promote freedom of religion and conscience throughout the world as a fundamental human right and as a source of stability for all countries. In so doing, it strives to assist newly formed democracies in implementing freedom of religion and conscience, assist religious and human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in promoting religious freedom, and identify and promote changes in the policies of regimes that severely persecute their citizens or others on the basis of religious belief.

The vast majority of the world's people have religious beliefs, which they hold dear. It is because religion is generally viewed by people as having such a central place in their lives that many regard religious freedom as the most important of rights. At the same time, global trends, regional distinctions, local preferences, and personal histories often lead to significant overlap between religious identity and ethnicity, class, language group, or political affiliation.

The right to religious freedom can be abused in many ways both blatant and subtle. It can be helpful to recognize that abuses of, or restrictions on, religious freedom can take many forms, as suggested by the five categories discussed below. In totalitarian/authoritarian regimes, and states which exhibit marked hostility toward minority religions, a wide range of abuses and repression takes place at the hands of state agents. In other states, where there are appropriate legal provisions for religious freedom, we nevertheless may see state agents neglecting to uphold these legal provisions by investigating and prosecuting instances of societal discrimination. In yet other cases, states may have certain discriminatory legislation that favors majority religions, or may pass legislation or enact policies that discriminate against a small number of religious groups that the state identifies as cults.

The first and most stark category of abuses is seen in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, which seek to control religious thought and expression. Such regimes regard some or all religious groups as enemies of the state because of their religious beliefs or their independence from central authority. Some governments are hostile towards particular groups, often identifying them as "security threats." It is important to distinguish between groups of religious believers who express legitimate political grievances and those that misuse religion to advocate violence against other religious groups or the state.

This report categorizes as an abuse a government's broad repression of religious expression among a peacefully practicing population on the grounds of security concerns. For example, the war on terror is used by some governments as an excuse to repress peaceful religious practice. The report also notes those countries and situations in which authorities' over-zealous actions taken against observant believers suspected of extremism have had the principal effect of restricting religious freedom. In some countries, for example, many refrain from attending mosque frequently for fear that their government will characterize them as religious extremists.

A second category of abuses occurs with state hostility toward minority or non-approved religions. These governments implement policies designed to demand that adherents recant their faith, to cause religious group members to flee the country, or to intimidate and harass certain religious groups. This report notes, for example, when state repression of religious groups was linked to ethnic identity, because a government dominated by a majority ethnic group suppressed the faith of a minority group. Also detailed in this report are instances where governments used an individual's religious devotion as a proxy for determining his or her political ideology, which resulted in the intimidation and harassment of certain religious groups.

Yet a third kind of abuse stems from a state's failure to address either societal discrimination or societal abuses against religious groups. In these countries, legislation may discourage religious discrimination and persecution, but officials fail to prevent attacks, harassment, or other harmful acts against minority religious groups. Protecting religious freedom is not just a matter of having in place laws and policies which in written form seem to uphold religious freedom. It requires active work by a government at all levels to prevent abuses by governmental or private actors, to bring abusers to justice, and to provide redress to victims, when appropriate. Governments have the responsibility to ensure that their agents do not commit abuses of religious freedom and to protect religious freedom by rule of law in a way that ensures that private actors do not repress the rights of others. In addition, it is critical that governments foster an environment of respect and tolerance for all people. This report documents cases in which governments have failed to prevent violations of religious freedom, or have not responded with consistency and vigor to violations of religious freedom by private actors, nongovernmental entities, or local law enforcement officials.

A fourth category encompasses abuses that occur when governments have enacted discriminatory legislation or implemented policies that favor majority religions and disadvantage minority religions. These circumstances often result from historical dominance by the majority religion and a bias against new or minority religions. Although the majority of the population in a country may worship without harassment, such a situation cannot be characterized as true freedom to choose one's faith and worship freely. Furthermore, government backing of a religion can result in restrictions even on worshippers in the majority faith, when the state favors only one interpretation of that religion.

Finally, the practice of discriminating against certain religions by identifying them as dangerous cults or sects is a common type of restriction on religious freedom, even in countries where religious freedom is otherwise respected. For example, this report discusses denunciations against Shi'ite Muslims in Sunni-majority countries, and vice

versa, especially where governments have taken it upon themselves to regulate religious belief and practice according to one of these faith traditions.

The remainder of this Executive Summary consists of two parts. Part I summarizes, on a country-by-country basis, actions the U.S. Government has taken to advance international religious freedom in the nations designated "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPCs) for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Part II provides a summary of conditions in a number of countries where religious freedom is of significant interest, including in Countries of Particular Concern. For each country, this section notes the legal situation and relevant policies, and gives examples of particular government abuses or positive steps governments have taken to promote or protect religious freedom. In most cases, these countries exhibit one or more of the forms of abuses outlined above.

PART I: U.S. ACTIONS IN COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRF Act) requires an annual review of the status of religious freedom worldwide and the designation of countries that have "engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom" during the reporting period as "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPCs). Following the designation, a period of negotiation may ensue, in which the United States seeks to work with a designated country to bring about change. Subsequently, depending upon the results of these discussions, one or more actions are chosen by the Secretary of State, as required by the IRF Act. Legislative options for CPC actions range from application of sanctions, to a bilateral agreement, to a waiver. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and his office take actions to promote religious freedom in each CPC throughout the year. This section highlights actions by other U.S. Government officials to promote religious freedom and to encourage the governments to take positive steps to improve conditions for religious believers. In November 2006, the Secretary redesignated Burma, China, North Korea, Iran, Sudan, Eritrea, and Saudi Arabia. The Secretary designated Uzbekistan as a CPC for the first time. Vietnam was not redesignated a CPC.

PART II: COUNTRY-SPECIFIC CONDITIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

This section provides a summary of conditions in a number of countries where religious freedom is of significant interest. For each country, this section notes the legal situation and relevant policies and gives examples of particular government abuses or positive steps governments have taken in the reporting period to promote or protect religious freedom.

Macedonia

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. However, the law places some limits on religious practice by restricting the registration of religious organizations.

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

There were isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. The ongoing dispute between the Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox Churches remained unresolved.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed the draft "Law on the Legal Status of a Church, Religious Community, and Religious Group" with government and religious leaders on numerous occasions and urged all parties to support a law that meets international standards with respect to human rights and religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 9,781 square miles and a population of 2.1 million. The country's two major religious groups are Orthodox Christianity and Islam. There is a general correlation between ethnicity and religion. The majority of Orthodox believers are ethnic Macedonian, and the majority of Muslim believers are ethnic Albanian. Approximately 65 percent of the population is Macedonian Orthodox, 32 percent is Muslim, 1 percent is Roman Catholic, and 2 percent follow other religious beliefs (largely various Protestant denominations). There is also a small Jewish community, most of whose members reside in Skopje.

Foreign missionaries are active in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. However, the law places some limits on religious practices, including restricting the registration of religious organizations, the establishment of places of worship, the collection of contributions, and locations where religious rites may be held. The law provides for penalties against any person or group that restricts a citizen's right to join a religious organization or participate in religious rituals. The Constitution recognizes the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC), the Islamic community, the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and the Methodist Church as "religious communities." All other registered religious organizations are considered to be "religious groups."

The 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups further defines the constitutional provision for religious freedom. It establishes the procedure for religious organizations to register and prohibits the registration of more than one organization for each religious confession. The law specifies that religious organizations must be registered to perform religious ceremonies, obtain permits to erect religious buildings, or request visas for foreigners coming to the country to undertake religious work. In 1998 and 1999, the Constitutional Court struck down several provisions of the 1997 law, which has resulted in considerable confusion over which provisions are still enforceable. In practice the law was not enforced consistently.

Regulations require that foreigners entering the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites obtain approval from the State Commission for Relations with the Religious Communities and Groups to receive a visa. When applying for visas, such

persons must submit a letter of invitation from representatives of a religious organization in the country to the commission, which then issues a letter of approval to be submitted with the visa request.

The law places some restrictions on the locations where religious ceremonies may be held. It provides that religious rites and religious activities "shall take place at churches, mosques, and other temples, and in gardens that are parts of those facilities; at cemeteries; and at other facilities of the religious group." Provision is made for holding services in other places, provided that a permit is obtained from the State Commission for Relations with the Religious Communities and Groups at least 15 days in advance. No permit or permission is required to perform religious rites in a private home. The law also states that religious activities "shall not violate the public peace and order, and shall not disrespect the religious feelings and other freedoms and rights" of other citizens.

The law also places some limitations on the collection of contributions by restricting it to places where religious rites and activities are conducted; however, these provisions of the law were not enforced.

Orthodox Easter and Christmas and Ramazan Bajram (end of Ramadan) are observed as national holidays. Other Christian, Islamic, and Jewish holidays are not national holidays, but they are government-designated religious holidays for adherents of those faiths.

Education laws restrict the establishment of all private primary schools, including parochial schools, and do not allow parents to homeschool their children. However, there are no restrictions placed on religious education that takes place in religious spaces such as churches and mosques. Children below the age of 10 years may not receive religious instruction without the permission of their parents or legal guardians.

On April 16, 2007, Parliament adopted amendments to the law on education to allow for religious education in public schools starting in the 6th year of primary school, when students are approximately 12 years old. Religious instruction is not mandatory. Parents and the student must give consent and specify which religious instruction they wish to receive. The law does not limit the type or number of religious beliefs that can be taught. Courses were to range from religious practice to history of religion and ethics. The new amendments were scheduled to be implemented starting in the 2008-09 academic year.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. However, restrictions contained in the Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups continued to be applied to a group known as the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid," which denies the MOC's self-declared autocephaly (also not recognized by other Orthodox churches). Led by a defrocked MOC bishop, Jovan Vraniskovski, this schismatic group is recognized by the Serbian Orthodox Church as an archbishopric; however, the group continues to exist in the country as an unregistered group after the State Commission for Relations with the Religious Communities and Groups rejected its application in 2004 and the Supreme Court rejected the group's appeal in 2005. Members of the group claimed undue government monitoring or harassment based on their religious beliefs.

The commission did not receive any new applications for the registration of a religious group during the period covered by this report. On January 10, 2007, the Supreme Court upheld a 2006 decision by the commission to reject the application of the Reformist Movement of Adventists. The commission cited a number of grounds for the denial, including that under the law only one group may be registered for each confession. The commission used similar arguments to deny the 2006 application of the Free Protestant Movement. The group's legal appeal was under consideration by the Supreme Court at the end of the period covered by this report.

Churches and mosques often are built without the appropriate building permits; however, the Government normally does not take action against religious groups that build structures without permits. In the past, several Protestant groups were unable to obtain building permits for new church facilities, often because of bureaucratic complications that affect all new construction, religious or secular. Some local human rights organizations stated that religious organizations who reported trouble obtaining building permits often had not followed the proper legal procedures for obtaining a permit. However, members of Jehovah's Witnesses alleged that government officials discriminated against their religious group by refusing to issue a building permit even though the group is officially registered and the proper documentation was provided.

The problem of restitution of religious properties expropriated by the former Yugoslav government was not fully resolved. Many religious communities had extensive grounds or other properties expropriated by the communist regime, and they have not regained full ownership of many of the properties. Ownership of almost all churches and many mosques has been restored to the appropriate religious community, but that was not the case for most of the other properties. Restitution or compensation claims are complicated by the fact that the seized properties have changed hands many times or have been developed. The Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM) claimed it was not able to regain rightful use of several mosques that the Government had agreed to return. In addition, the ICM alleged that in some cases the Government delayed the process of restitution by selling or starting new construction on disputed property and by questioning the historical legal claim of the ICM to religious properties. The ICM and the MOC cited greater difficulty in obtaining ownership of previously owned property if the property was located in a desirable location for investors or business owners, often in urban areas.

The Jewish community continued to work with the Government for the full restitution of individual property confiscated by the former Yugoslav government. The 2000 Law on Denationalization established a system for community and individual property restitution and a fund that regulates restitution for Holocaust victims without heirs. The Jewish community is the only religious group whose community property has been fully restituted. However, the process of individual property restitution continued to be slow, in large part because of the extensive documentation required to show the chain of ownership and lack of heirs. Construction of a Memorial Holocaust Center for the Jews from Macedonia, initiated in 2005 with property and funds restituted in accordance with the Denationalization Law, slowed considerably beginning in late 2006.

The Bektashi, a Sufi Islamic group, sued the Government for failing to reverse the former Yugoslavia's nationalization of the Bektashi's Tetovo compound, known as the Arabati Baba Tekke. The Bektashi also filed suit against the ICM, armed members of which

seized part of the complex in 2002. At the end of the period covered by this report, the ICM continued to occupy the area. The ICM claimed that the property belonged to them, since the Bektashi are a "sect" of Islam; however, the Bektashi are registered as a separate religious group and alleged that the property belonged strictly to the Bektashi community and not the Islamic community as a whole. The dispute continued at the end of the reporting period.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On April 25, 2007, Jovan Vraniskovski, leader of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid," was released from prison after serving 9 months of a 12-month sentence for embezzlement. He began serving the sentence on August 8, 2006, after being convicted of embezzling \$72,000 (€54,000) donated to the MOC. Vraniskovski continued to claim that he did not embezzle the money and that the conviction was a result of discrimination against him for his religious beliefs. On February 22, 2007, the Veles trial court accepted Vraniskovski's appeal for an early release due to good behavior. Vraniskovski was free at the end of the period covered by this report and did not face further imprisonment. Following his release from prison, a representative of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" said that government officials continued to refuse to return Vraniskovski's passport.

On April 10, 2007, Vraniskovski was acquitted for a second time on a separate charge involving \$410,000 (€324,000) allegedly embezzled from MOC funds while he was still a bishop with the MOC. Vraniskovski previously had served 7 months of an 18-month prison sentence on a 2004 conviction for "inciting religious or ethnic hatred." A 2006 Supreme Court decision reduced the sentence to time served and suspended a separate sentence for "falsely assuming religious authority." The 18-month sentence was based on charges that Vraniskovski held private religious services in union with the Serbian Orthodox Church and that he was responsible for the content of a religious calendar describing the MOC as "the last fortress of communism" and its believers as heretics. The suspended sentence resulted from charges that in 2003 Vraniskovski allegedly baptized a relative in an MOC church near Bitola. Authorities claimed his act constituted trespassing and "falsely assuming religious authority," since earlier he had been defrocked by the MOC and therefore was not authorized to perform religious rites in that church.

In December 2006 Jehovah's Witnesses reported that police harassed a number of their members in the town of Kichevo. The incidents were brought to the attention of officials in the central offices of the Ministry of Interior, who worked with the local police and members of the religious group; the result was the first-ever visit by the Director of the State Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups to the group's headquarters in Skopje. Leaders in the Jehovah's Witnesses community reported that the situation was resolved satisfactorily. While in prison Jovan Vraniskovski was considered by some human rights organizations to be a religious prisoner. There were no additional reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

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.

Anti-Semitism

Jewish leaders reported a number of instances in which unidentified persons sprayed graffiti containing Nazi content or symbols in the towns of Skopje, Bitola, and Stip. Authorities promptly responded to the incidents and believed that the perpetrators were not part of an organized group but likely were young individuals acting on their own.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

After taking office in September 2006, the Government increased efforts to reach out to different religious communities. Specific examples included high-level government attendance at various religious ceremonies and events and increased communication with religious communities, predominately through the State Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. On May 20, 2007, unidentified perpetrators set fire to a mosque in Obednik, a small southwestern village. The fire caused little damage, and local authorities believed the perpetrators were not from the village. The act was an isolated case and did not appear to be an organized effort. The Islamic and Orthodox communities publicly condemned the attack.

The Bektashi reported that on March 21, 2007, a large photograph at the entrance to the Arabati Baba Tekke compound was vandalized and a number of plants and trees on the grounds of the compound were destroyed. Police investigated the incident, found the perpetrators, and reportedly increased police presence at the compound. On February 10, 2007, Bishop Marko, a member of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid," was performing a religious ceremony at a public cemetery in Bitola when two members of a security firm, allegedly employed by MOC priests, pressured him to leave the cemetery. Marko refused, and the security guards physically assaulted him and destroyed his religious censer. Local police were called and reportedly also told Marko to leave, on the grounds that the cemetery was MOC property.

There continued to be isolated reports of vandalism at Macedonian Orthodox churches. The MOC considered these acts to be incidents of petty theft and did not believe that they were motivated by religious beliefs or discrimination. The continued denial of the MOC's autocephaly by the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" and the Serbian Orthodox Church at times provoked angry responses by the public, press, and Government, who viewed this rejection as an attack on the country's national identity.

Contrary to the previous year, no students affiliated with Vraniskovski's group reported that they were asked to leave the Orthodox theology school in Skopje.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives frequently met with government officials and also with leaders and representatives of the various religious communities to

address religious freedom issues and support the Government's policy of ethnic and religious tolerance. Embassy representatives discussed the draft law on religion with government and religious leaders on numerous occasions and urged all parties to support a law meeting international standards with respect to human rights and religious freedom.

The Ambassador and other embassy representatives continued to follow developments in the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" case and discussed the matter with the President, Prime Minister, MOC officials, and representatives of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid." Embassy officials urged respect for religious freedom and the rule of law, as well as moderation in language on both sides.

The Ambassador attended events to foster religious freedom, tolerance, and understanding, including Holocaust commemoration events.

Released on September 14, 2007