



# ERITREA

## Key Findings

The Eritrean government continues to repress religious freedom for unregistered, and in some cases registered, religious communities. Systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations include torture or other ill-treatment of religious prisoners, arbitrary arrests and detentions without charges, a prolonged ban on public religious activities of unregistered religious groups, and interference in the internal affairs of registered religious groups. The situation is particularly grave for Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses. The government dominates the internal affairs of the Orthodox Church of Eritrea, the country's largest Christian denomination, and suppresses the religious activities of Muslims, especially those opposed to the government-appointed head of the Muslim community. In light of these violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2016 that Eritrea be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Since 2004, USCIRF has recommended, and the State Department has designated, Eritrea as a CPC, most recently in July 2014.

Pentecostals, and others, one percent. On the positive side, there are no religious conflicts in Eritrea and relationships between religious communities are peaceful.

President Isaias Afwerki and the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) have ruled Eritrea since the country's independence from Ethiopia in 1993. President Afwerki and his circle maintain absolute authority. Thousands of Eritreans are imprisoned for their real or imagined opposition to the government, and a 2015 UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COI-E) report describes extensive use of torture and forced labor. No private newspapers, political opposition parties, or independent non-governmental organizations exist. The government requires all physically- and mentally-capable people between the ages of 18 and 70 to perform a full-time, indefinite, and poorly-paid national service obligation, which includes military, development, or civil service components. While the national service does include a civil service component, all Eritreans are required to undertake military training and Eritreans cannot choose which type of service they must complete. Hence, there is no alternative for conscientious objectors. The UN and various human

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## Background

There are no reliable statistics of religious affiliation in Eritrea. The Pew Charitable Trust estimates that Orthodox Christians comprise approximately 57 percent of the population, Muslims 36 percent, Roman Catholics four percent, and Protestants, including Evangelical Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Jehovah's Witnesses,

rights groups reported that individuals completing their national service obligation in the military are prohibited from practicing their religion and that persons who fail to participate in the national service are detained, sentenced to hard labor, abused, and have their legal documents confiscated. Further, a civilian militia program requirement for most males and females between the ages of 18 and 50 not in the military portion of national

service also does not allow for or provide an alternative for conscientious objectors.

The lack of fundamental human rights and economic opportunities in Eritrea has led thousands of Eritreans to flee the country to neighboring states and beyond to seek asylum, including in Europe and the United States. The UN reported in 2015 that since 2014 an estimated six percent of the population has fled the country.

There are very few legal protections for freedom of religion or belief in Eritrea. Those that do exist are either not implemented or are limited by other laws or in practice. The Eritrean constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief; guarantees the right to practice and manifest any religion; and prohibits religious discrimination. Unfortunately, the constitution has not been implemented since its ratification in 1997. In May 2014, President Afwerki announced a new constitution would be drafted, although no action had been taken by the end of the reporting period.

## **Religious Freedom Conditions 2015–2016**

### **Registration**

In 2002, the government imposed a registration requirement on all religious groups other than the four officially-recognized religions: the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea; Sunni Islam; the Roman Catholic Church; and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea, a Lutheran-affiliated denomination. All other religious communities

national safety, security and supreme national interests, instigating refusal to serve national service and stirring up acts of political or religious disturbances calculated to endanger the independence and territorial sovereignty of the country.”

To date, no other religious communities have been registered. The Baha’i community, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, and the Seventh-day Adventists submitted the required applications after the new registration requirements were enacted; the Eritrean government has yet to act on their applications. The government’s inaction means that unregistered religious communities lack a legal basis on which to practice their faiths, including holding services or other religious ceremonies. According to the COI-E report and Eritrean refugees interviewed by USCIRF, most churches of non-registered religious communities are closed and government approval is required to build houses of worship. Leaders and members of unregistered communities that continue to practice their faith are punished with imprisonment and fines.

### **Religious Prisoners**

While the country’s closed nature makes exact numbers difficult to determine, the State Department reports 1,200 to 3,000 persons are imprisoned on religious grounds in Eritrea. During the reporting period, there were a few reported incidents of new arrests.

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are required to apply annually for registration with the Office of Religious Affairs. Registration requirements include a description of the group’s history in Eritrea; detailed information about its foreign sources of funding, leadership, assets, and activities; and an explanation of how it would benefit the country or is unique compared to other religious communities. Registration also requires conformity with Proclamation No. 73/1995 “to Legally Standardize and Articulate Religious Institutions and Activities,” which permits registered religious institutions the right to preach, teach, and engage in awareness campaigns but prohibits “. . . infringing upon

Reports of torture and other abuses of religious prisoners continue. Religious prisoners are sent routinely to the harshest prisons and receive some of the cruelest punishments. Released religious prisoners have reported that they were confined in crowded conditions, such as in 20-foot metal shipping containers or underground barracks, and subjected to extreme temperature fluctuations. In addition, there have been reports of deaths of religious prisoners due to harsh treatment or denial of medical care. Persons detained for religious activities, in both short-term and long-term detentions, are not formally charged, permitted access to

legal counsel, accorded due process, or allowed family visits. Prisoners are not permitted to pray aloud, sing, or preach, and religious books are banned. Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses released from prison report being pressured to recant their faith, forced to sign a statement that they would no longer gather to worship, and warned not to re-engage in religious activities.

### **Pentecostals and Evangelicals**

Pentecostals and Evangelicals comprise the majority of religious prisoners. The Eritrean government is suspicious of newer religious communities, in particular Protestant Evangelical and Pentecostal communities. It has characterized these groups as being part of a foreign campaign to infiltrate the country, engaging in aggressive evangelism alien to Eritrea's cultural traditions, and causing social divisions. During 2015, security forces continued to arrest followers of these faiths for participating in clandestine prayer meetings and religious ceremonies, although toleration of these groups varied by location. The State Department reported that some local authorities denied water and gas to Pentecostals. The Eritrean government and Eritrean religious leaders do not publicize arrests and releases and government secrecy and intimidation makes documenting the exact numbers of such cases difficult. USCIRF received confirmation of almost 200 arrests in 2015.

### **Jehovah's Witnesses**

Jehovah's Witnesses are persecuted for their political neutrality and conscientious objection to military service, which are aspects of their faith. On October 25, 1994, President Afwerki issued a decree revoking their citizenship for their refusal to take part in the referendum on independence or to participate in national service. Since 1994, Jehovah's Witnesses have been barred from obtaining government-issued identity and travel documents, government jobs, and business licenses. Eritrean identity cards are required for legal recognition of marriages or land purchases. The State Department reported that some local authorities denied water and gas to Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses who have refused to serve in the military have been imprisoned without trial, some for over a decade, including Paulos Eyassu, Issac Mogos,

and Negede Teklemariam who have been detained in Sawa prison since September 24, 1994. Moreover, the government's requirement that high school students complete their final year at the Sawa Training and Education Camp, which includes six months of military training, effectively denies Jehovah's Witnesses an opportunity to graduate from high school. Some children of Jehovah's Witnesses have been expelled from school because of their refusal to salute the flag or to pay for membership in the officially sanctioned national organization for youth and students.

Whole congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses are arrested while attending worship services in homes or in rented facilities and individual Witnesses are regularly arrested and imprisoned for expressing their faith to others. Some are quickly released, while others are held indefinitely without charge. In 2015, as many as 55 Jehovah's Witnesses were detained without charge or trial. Of these, 16 are older than 60, five are older than 70, and one is in his 80s.

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### **Recognized Religious Communities**

The Eritrean government also strictly oversees the activities of the four recognized religious communities. These groups are required to submit activity reports every six months; instructed not to accept funds from co-religionists abroad (an order with which the Eritrean Orthodox Church reportedly said it would not comply); and have had religious leaders appointed by government officials. The Eritrean government has appointed the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Mufti of the Eritrean Muslim community, as well as other lower-level religious officials. The government-deposed Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Antonios, who protested government interference in his church's affairs, has been held incommunicado under house arrest since

2007. Hundreds of Orthodox Christian and Muslim religious leaders and laymen who protested these appointments remain imprisoned. The COI-E as well as Eritrean refugees interviewed by USCIRF reported government surveillance of services of the four official religions. Muslims opposed to the government are labeled as fundamentalists and human rights organizations report that religious freedom violations against the Muslim community increased following the January 21, 2013 mutiny during which 100-200 Army soldiers seized the headquarters of the state broadcaster in Asmara. Furthermore, Eritrean officials visiting the United States reportedly pressured diaspora members to attend only Eritrean government-approved Orthodox churches in this country.

Within this environment, the Catholic Church is granted a few more, but still restricted, freedoms than other religious communities, including the permission to host some visiting clergy; to receive funding from the Holy See; to travel for religious purposes and training in small numbers; and to receive exemptions from national service for seminary students and nuns.

## **U.S. Policy**

Relations between the United States and Eritrea remain poor. The U.S. government has long expressed concern about the Eritrean government's human rights practices and support for Ethiopian, Somali, and other armed and rebel groups in the region. The government of Eritrea expelled USAID in 2005, and U.S. programs in the country ended in fiscal year 2006. Eritrea receives no U.S. development, humanitarian, or security assistance. Since 2010, the government has refused to accredit a new U.S. ambassador to the country; in response the U.S. government revoked the credentials of the Eritrean ambassador to the United States.

U.S. government officials routinely raise religious freedom violations when speaking about human rights conditions in Eritrea. The United States was a co-sponsor of a 2012 UN Human Rights Council resolution that successfully created the position of Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea. In July 2014, the United States supported the creation of a UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea to investigate systematic violations of human rights, recommend how to improve conditions and ensure

accountability, and raise awareness of the situation in the country. In 2015, the U.S. government supported the continuation of the COI-E's mandate for one additional year to determine if the Eritrean government's actions constitute crimes against humanity.

In September 2004, the State Department designated Eritrea a CPC. When re-designating Eritrea in September 2005 and January 2009, the State Department announced the denial of commercial export to Eritrea of defense articles and services covered by the Arms Export Control Act, with some items exempted. The Eritrean government subsequently intensified its repression of unregistered religious groups with a series of arrests and detentions of clergy and ordinary members of the affected groups. The State Department most recently re-designated Eritrea a CPC in July 2014, and continued the presidential action of the arms embargo, although since 2011 this has been under the auspices of UN Security Council resolution 1907 (see below).

U.S.-Eritrean relations also are heavily influenced, often adversely, by strong U.S. ties with Ethiopia. Gaining independence in 1993, Eritrea fought a costly border war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000. The United States, the United Nations, the European Union, and the now-defunct Organization of African Unity were formal witnesses to the 2000 accord ending that conflict. However, Eritrean-Ethiopian relations remain tense due to Ethiopia's refusal to permit demarcation of the boundary according to the Hague's Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission's 2002 decision. The U.S. government views the commission's decision as "final and binding" and expects both parties to comply.

U.S. policy toward Eritrea also is concentrated on U.S. concerns that the country's activities in the region could destabilize the Horn of Africa. In December 2009, the United States joined a 13-member majority on the UN Security Council in adopting Resolution 1907, sanctioning Eritrea for supporting armed groups in Somalia and failing to withdraw its forces from the Eritrean-Djibouti border following clashes with Djibouti. The sanctions include an arms embargo, travel restrictions, and asset freezes on the Eritrean government's political and military leaders, as well as other individuals designated by the Security Council's Committee on Somalia Sanctions. In April 2010, President Obama announced Executive Order 13536 blocking the

property and property interests of several individuals for their financing of al-Shabaab in Somalia, including Yemane Ghebreab, presidential advisor and the former head of political affairs. In December 2011, the United States voted in favor of UN Security Council Resolution 2023, which calls on UN member states to implement Resolution 1907's sanctions and ensure that their dealings with Eritrea's mining industry do not support activities that would destabilize the region. In 2015, the U.S. government voted in the UN Security Council to retain an arms embargo on Eritrea and to renew for another year the mandate of its Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea.

### Recommendations

The U.S. government should press for immediate improvements to end religious freedom violations in Eritrea and raise concerns through bilateral and multi-lateral initiatives. In addition to recommending that the U.S. government should continue to designate Eritrea a CPC and maintaining the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a), USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Continue to use bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to urge the government of Eritrea to: release unconditionally and immediately detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities, including Orthodox Patriarch Antonios; end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities and register such groups; grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses; provide for conscientious objection by law in compliance with international human rights standards; implement the Constitution of 1997; bring national laws and regulations, including registration requirements for religious communities, into compliance with international human rights standards; bring the conditions and treatment of prisoners in line with international standards; and extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross;
- Ensure, if development assistance is to be resumed, that it is directed to programs that contribute directly to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law;
- Intensify international efforts to resolve the current impasse between Eritrea and Ethiopia regarding implementation of the boundary demarcation as determined by the "final and binding" decision of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission that was established following the 1998-2000 war;
- Encourage unofficial dialogue with Eritrean authorities on religious freedom issues by promoting a visit by U.S. and international religious leaders, and expand the use of educational and cultural exchanges, such as the Fulbright Program, the International Visitor Program, and lectures by visiting American scholars and experts; and
- Work with other nations, especially those with mining interests in Eritrea and large Eritrean diaspora communities, to draw attention to religious freedom abuses in Eritrea and advocate for the unconditional and immediate release of detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities, including Orthodox Patriarch Antonios.