

The religious freedom situation in Eritrea under the regime of President Isaias Afwerki remains grave, particularly for Jehovah's Witnesses and members of other small and non-traditional religious groups such as Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians. The government dominates the internal affairs of the Orthodox Church of Eritrea, the country's largest Christian denomination, and suppresses Muslim religious activities or groups viewed as radical or opposed to the government-appointed head of the Muslim community. Arbitrary arrests, torture, and forced labor are extensive. In light of these violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2011 that Eritrea be designated as a "Country of Particular Concern," or CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. Since 2004, the Commission has recommended, and the State Department has designated, Eritrea as a CPC.

### **BACKGROUND**

President Isaias Afwerki and the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) have ruled Eritrea since the country gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993. After an initially promising start toward democratization, the regime has become increasingly repressive with President Isaias focused on maintaining absolute authority. Thousands of Eritreans with religious or civil society affiliations and allegiances have been imprisoned for their real or imagined opposition to the government, and arbitrary arrests, torture, and forced labor are extensive. No private newspapers, political opposition parties, or independent non-governmental organizations exist, and independent public gatherings are prohibited.

In 2002, the government increased its control over civil society after a second war with Ethiopia by imposing 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. The requirements mandated that these religions provide detailed financial and membership information, as well as background on their activities in Eritrea.

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

The government of Eritrea continues to arrest, detain, and torture people because of their religious beliefs and imposes strict controls on all religious groups.

**Arrests, Detention, and Torture:** The State Department, non-governmental human rights organizations, and Christian advocacy groups estimate that 2,000 to 3,000 persons are imprisoned on religious grounds in Eritrea, the vast majority of whom are Evangelical or Pentecostal Christians. The State Department's most recent religious freedom report states that 115 followers of unregistered religious groups were arrested between 2009 and 2010. Fifty-two Jehovah's Witnesses currently are detained without trial, or administrative appeal. Three Jehovah's Witnesses have been held for more than 15 years despite the maximum legal penalty for refusing to perform national service being two years. In 2006, the government deposed Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios and placed him under house arrest after he protested the Eritrean Department of Religious Affairs' interference in church's affairs. The government has since prevented him from communicating with the outside world and he is reportedly denied medical care. International human rights organizations report that many of the Muslims detained without charge are non-violent critics of the government-imposed leadership of the Muslim community or of policies that discriminate against independent Muslims.

Detainees imprisoned in violation of freedom of religion and related human rights have reportedly been beaten and tortured. Prisoners are not permitted to pray aloud, sing, or preach, and no religious books are allowed. Released religious prisoners report being confined in crowded conditions, such as in 20-foot metal shipping containers or underground barracks

where some have been subjected to extreme temperature fluctuations. Persons detained for religious activities, in both short- and long-term detentions, often are not formally charged, permitted access to legal counsel, accorded due process, or allowed access to their families. During the past year, there were reports of deaths of religious prisoners who refused to recant their beliefs, who were denied medical care, or who were subjected to other ill treatment.

**Registration Requirements:** All religious groups other than the four officially-recognized religions are required to register with the government. No religious group has been registered since 2002, although the Baha'i, Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church, and Seventh-day Adventists all submitted the required applications. As a result of the registration requirement and the government's inaction on applications, all of Eritrea's religious communities (except the four government-sanctioned ones) lack a legal basis on which to practice their faiths publicly, including holding prayer meetings or weddings. The government's campaign against religious activities by persons belonging to unregistered denominations frequently targets Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, and Jehovah's Witnesses who are denied citizenship. Eritrean security forces conduct mass arrests of followers of these faiths, including at prayer meetings.

**Restrictions on Recognized Religious Groups:** The government strictly governs the internal affairs of the four recognized religions, including appointing religious leaders and controlling religious activities. The recognized groups are required to submit activity reports to the government every six months. In December, the Eritrean Department of Religious Affairs reportedly told these groups to stop accepting funds from co-religionists abroad, an order with which the Eritrean Orthodox Church reportedly said it would not comply. Despite community protests, the Department of Religious Affairs also appoints the Mufti of the Eritrean Muslim community. The government does not permit Muslim religious activities or groups it views as "radical," pointing to the actions of foreign or foreign-inspired Muslim fundamentalists whom they believe are seeking to radicalize the traditional Eritrean practice of Islam.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

In response to the policies and practices of Eritrea's government, the U.S. government should continue to designate Eritrea as a CPC and:

- Prohibit any foreign company from raising capital or listing its securities in U.S. markets if it is engaged in the development of Eritrea's mineral resources or involved in ventures with the government or government-controlled entities;
- Employ the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to impose economic sanctions on senior Eritrean officials who have engaged in human rights abuses;
- Impose targeted sanctions, such as asset freezes and travel bans, against individuals and institutions identified as responsible for, or complicit in, severe religious freedom violations;
- Under CPC designation, maintain the denial of commercial export to Eritrea of defense articles and services covered by the Arms Control Export Act; and condition any resumption of development assistance to Eritrea on measurable improvements in religious freedom; and
- Urge the government of Eritrea to: unconditionally and immediately release detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities; implement the constitutional guarantees of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; institute a voluntary registration process for religious groups and promptly register those groups that comply with the requirements issued in 2002; and extend an official invitation for visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

**Please see USCIRF's 2011 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Eritrea.**