

May 5, 2005: Eritrea: USCIRF issues brief with U.S. policy recommendations

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today is releasing Policy Focus: Eritrea. The policy brief includes specific recommendations for U.S. policy, including actions the State Department should take as a consequence of designating Eritrea a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The Commission, in February 2004, publicly recommended for the first time that Eritrea be designated as a CPC. The State Department subsequently acted on that recommendation, designating Eritrea as a CPC on September 15, 2004. "Although the 180-day deadline has passed to take action under IRFA, the State Department has yet to announce what policy steps it is going to take," said USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal. "The Commission calls on the State Department to take action and has made some specific recommendations in that regard." The Commission has found that the government of Eritrea engages in systematic and egregious violations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. The government of Eritrea has banned public religious activities by all religious groups that are not officially recognized, closed their places of worship, and inordinately delayed action on registration applications by religious groups. To suppress the religious activities of the unregistered groups, Eritrean security forces have disrupted private worship, have conducted mass arrests of participants at prayer meetings and other gatherings, and have detained those arrested without charge for indefinite periods of time. In October 2004, the Commission sent a delegation to Eritrea to examine religious freedom conditions there and to gather information to aid in the development of recommendations for United States policy to promote freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief in Eritrea. Our findings and policy recommendations are included in the policy brief we are issuing today. They include:

- The U.S. government should engage in vigorous advocacy on religious freedom and other universal human rights at all levels of involvement with the government of Eritrea and draw international attention to religious freedom abuses in Eritrea, including in multilateral fora such as the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.
- The U.S. government should conduct a review of development assistance to Eritrea with the aim of redirecting such assistance to programs that contribute directly to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Increases in other forms of development assistance should depend on measurable improvements in religious freedom.

Policy Focus: Eritrea can be found on the Commission's web site at www.uscirf.gov.

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