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This month marks two important anniversaries that underscore the continuing deterioration of religious freedom and related human rights in Eritrea: the 2007 house arrest of Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios and the 2002 imposition of onerous registration requirements on all but four officially recognized religious communities. Since 2002, 2,000-3,000 people have been imprisoned for the peaceful practice of their religious beliefs. President Isaias Afewerki has ruled Eritrea since 1993 and his regime is among the most repressive in the world.

“The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) condemns Eritrea’s egregious religious freedom violations and the continued house arrest of Patriarch Antonios, who has been denied medical assistance for his severe diabetes and deteriorating health,” said Ambassador Jackie Wolcott, USCIRF’s Executive Director. “Eritrea should unconditionally release all persons imprisoned for their religious beliefs and abide by international religious freedom standards.”

Since 2004, USCIRF has recommended – and the State Department has designated – Eritrea as a “country of particular concern” (CPC), for its “systematic, ongoing and egregious” religious freedom abuses. Spotlighting Eritrea is particularly timely given the discovery of mineral resources there and Eritrea’s foreign capital and investment goals. Besides continuing existing actions against Eritrea, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government impose targeted

sanctions against Eritrean religious freedom and human rights abusers through the International Emergency Economic Powers Act; bar any foreign developer of Eritrea's mineral resources from raising capital or listing its securities in the United States; work with international partners to spotlight Eritrea's religious freedom abuses: and advocate for the release of religious prisoners, including Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios.

“These two anniversaries highlight how the people of Eritrea continue to be denied the universal right to religious freedom and other fundamental freedoms,” said Ambassador Wolcott. “The world should not be silent in the face of such abuses.”

On May 27, 2007 the regime illegally deposed Patriarch Antonios and placed him under arrest at an undisclosed residence. Patriarch Antonios was first removed from his post in 2006 after refusing the regime's order to excommunicate 3,000 parishioners who opposed the Afweki government and after he called for the release of political prisoners.

Individuals imprisoned for religious reasons often are beaten, tortured, and pressed to renounce their faith. Those who were released reported having been confined in 20-foot metal shipping containers or in underground barracks, and have suffered the medical consequences of extreme temperature fluctuations.

On May 17, 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. No religious group has since been approved and the religious activities of groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, and Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, have been deemed "illegal," with their places of worship closed and worship services and other activities banned. Mass detentions of people engaging in such activities now routinely occur. The government also routinely interferes in the internal affairs of registered religious groups, and imprisons Muslims and Orthodox Christians for protesting government interference in their internal affairs.

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