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Front Cover: KHUSHPUR, Pakistan, March 4, 2011 – Pakistanis carry the coffin of Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's slain minister of minorities, who was assassinated March 2 by the Pakistani Taliban for campaigning against the country's blasphemy laws. Bhatti, 42, a close friend of USCIRF, warned in a Washington visit just one month before his death that he had received numerous death threats. More than 15,000 persons attended his funeral. (Photo by Aamir Qureshi/AFP/Getty Images)

Back Cover: JUBA, Sudan, January 9, 2011 – Southern Sudanese line up at dawn in the first hours of the week-long independence referendum to create the world's newest state. The referendum vote was the final milestone in the implementation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which ended more than 20 years of north-south civil war in Sudan. (Photo by Roberto Schmidt/AFP/Getty Images)

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The 2011 Annual Report is dedicated to the memory of Shahbaz Bhatti, the Pakistani Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs. Shahbaz was a courageous advocate for the religious freedoms of all Pakistanis, and he was assassinated on March 2 by the Pakistani Taliban for those efforts.

Eritrea

FINDINGS: Systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations continue in Eritrea. These violations include: torture or other ill-treatment of thousands of religious prisoners, sometimes resulting in death; arbitrary arrests and detentions without charges of members of unregistered religious groups; a prolonged ban on public religious activities; disruption of private religious gatherings and social events and closure of places of worship of unrecognized religious groups; and inordinate delays in responding to registration applications from religious groups.

In light of these violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2011 that Eritrea be designated as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC. Since 2004, the Commission has recommended, and the State Department has designated, Eritrea as a CPC. In September 2005, when renewing the CPC designation, the State Department announced the denial of commercial export to Eritrea of defense articles and services covered by the Arms Export Control Act. This was the first, and so far only, unique presidential action under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) in response to any CPC designation worldwide.

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. The government has appointed the heads of both the Orthodox and Muslim communities, despite community objections, and in 2006 placed under house arrest the government-deposed Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios, who protested government interference in his church’s affairs.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS: USCIRF recommends that, in addition to continuing the existing IRFA sanction against Eritrea, the U.S. government should employ the International Emergency Economic Powers Act to impose targeted sanctions against individuals and institutions identified as responsible for, or complicit in, serious religious freedom and human rights abuses. USCIRF further recommends that the U.S. government prohibit any foreign company from raising capital or listing its securities in the United States while engaged in developing Eritrea’s mineral resources, engage in vigorous advocacy of religious freedom at all levels of involvement with the Eritrean government, draw international attention to religious freedom abuses in Eritrea, encourage unofficial dialogue with Eritreans on religious freedom issues, condition any resumption of development assistance to Eritrea on measurable improvements in religious freedom and human rights, and intensify international efforts to resolve the current political impasse between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy toward Eritrea can be found at the end of this chapter.

Religious Freedom Conditions

Government Policies toward Religious Groups and Activities

Eritrea has been ruled by President Isaias Afwerki and the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) since the country gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Isaias, the former leader of the successful national liberation movement and the current head of the PFDJ, was chosen President in 1993 by the Transitional National Assembly. After an initially promising start toward democratization, the Isaias regime has become increasingly repressive. President Isaias is quite paranoid about losing authority, concentrating power in his hands and those of a small cadre of associates who fought in the liberation struggle. Eritrea is commonly referred to as the “North Korea of Africa” and is currently considered the most repressive state on the continent. The constitution and elections have been indefinitely suspended. Thousands of Eritreans with religious or civil society affiliations and allegiances are imprisoned for their real or imagined opposition to the government, and arbitrary arrests, torture, and forced labor are extensive. No private newspapers, opposition political parties, or independent non-governmental organizations exist. Independent public gatherings are prohibited.

In this context, the Eritrean government officially recognizes four religious communities: the (Coptic) Orthodox Church of Eritrea; Sunni Islam; the Roman Catholic Church; and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea, a Lutheran-affiliated denomination. The government imposes a number of invasive controls over the four recognized religious groups that prevents their ability to operate freely. The government is also hostile toward other Christian groups, particularly Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations.

In 2002, the government increased its control over civil society following a second war with Ethiopia, and imposed a registration requirement on all religious groups other than the four officially-recognized religions. The requirements mandated that communities provide detailed financial and membership information, as well as background on their activities in Eritrea. Among those affected were Protestant Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian denominations, as well as the Baha’is. Some of these religious communities have operated in Eritrea for decades.

Because of the government’s registration requirement, no group can legally hold public religious activities until its registration is approved. The requirement effectively makes unregistered religious activity “illegal,” which has resulted in places of worship being closed and prohibitions being placed on the public religious activities, including worship services, of all unregistered religious communities. No religious group has been registered since 2002, although the Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church, Seventh-day Adventists, and Baha’i religious community all submitted the required applications. As a result of the registration requirement and of the government’s inaction on registration 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. Further restrictions are described below.

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. Fifty-two Jehovah’s Witnesses are detained without trial, or administrative appeal. A third of the Jehovah’s Witnesses currently detained are reported to be over 60 years old, well beyond draft age. Additionally, three Jehovah’s Witnesses – Paulos Eyassu, Isaac Mogos, and Negede Teklemariam – 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 his church's affairs. Since then, he has been prevented from communicating with the outside world and reportedly denied medical care. There is no new information on the detention of three reformist members of the Orthodox clergy who have been imprisoned since 2005.

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. Those detained include more than 180 Muslims opposed to the state's appointment of the Mufti of the Eritrean Muslim community.

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 20-foot metal shipping containers or in underground barracks, some located in areas subjecting prisoners to extreme temperature fluctuations. There are credible reports, including during the past year, that the security forces have coerced detainees to renounce their faith; some prisoners were required to recant their religious beliefs as a precondition of release. 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, were denied medical care, or were subjected to other ill treatment, including in April, June, July, and October of 2010 and January 2011.

The State Department's most recent religious freedom report states that 115 followers of unregistered religious groups were arrested during the 2009-2010 reporting period, including 27 on Good Friday (April 2). Christian advocacy groups report that since December 2010, more than 100 evangelicals have been arrested, including 41 on New Year's Eve and 35 on January 9. Other arrests reported by Christian advocacy groups during 2010 include 15 men in military service at an unregistered evangelical church in November, 37 Christians in Assab in November, and 25 members of the Asmara Full Gospel Church on April 2.

The Situation of Unregistered Religious Groups

Since 1994, the government of Eritrea has denied Jehovah's Witnesses citizenship and a range of government services, as well as civil and political rights. President Isais Afwerki issued a decree in October 1994 barring Witnesses from obtaining government jobs, business licenses, and government-issued identity and travel documents. He reportedly viewed their refusal on religious grounds to participate in the 1993 independence referendum or to perform mandatory national military service as a rejection of Eritrean citizenship. Without Eritrean identity cards Jehovah's Witnesses cannot obtain legal recognition of marriages or land purchases.

The government requires a military training component for secondary school graduation, with no non-military alternative service option, which effectively denies educational and employment opportunities to young Jehovah's Witnesses, causing many to flee the country. 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.

The government's campaign against religious activities by persons belonging to unregistered denominations frequently targets Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians. Government officials have criticized "non-traditional" Christian denominations for engaging in evangelism that they allege is socially divisive and alien to Eritrea's cultural traditions. The ruling party also fears that these religious

communities could be encouraged by their coreligionists in the United States to take actions against the government's undemocratic rule. As discussed above, in the past year Eritrean security forces continued to conduct mass arrests of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, including at prayer meetings, although fewer such arrests were reported than in previous years.

Government violations of religious freedom are particularly severe in the armed forces. Armed forces members are banned from attending Protestant prayer meetings, subject to punishment by imprisonment. Armed forces members and national service inductees reportedly face severe punishment for possessing religious literature, including Bibles.

The Situation of Recognized Religious Groups

The government strictly controls and dominates the internal affairs of the four recognized religions, including appointing religious leaders and overseeing and monitoring 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. The Eritrean Orthodox Church reportedly said it would not comply with the order.

The government's interference in the internal affairs of the Orthodox Church began increasing in 2005, after the Church started resisting Asmara's demands. The Orthodox Church of Eritrea is the country's largest Christian denomination and the institutional expression of the country's traditionally-dominant Coptic form of Christianity. Security forces continue to target reformist elements in the Orthodox Church, arresting religious activists and preventing their meetings. In July 2005, the government revoked the exemption of Orthodox priests, monks, and deacons from mandatory national service, reportedly resulting in a shortage of clergy, particularly in smaller, rural churches. In May 2007, the government appointed a new Patriarch of the Orthodox Church of Eritrea, replacing Patriarch Antonios and placing him under house arrest. In addition, a government-appointed administrator, who is not a member of the Orthodox clergy, manages the Church's affairs and controls its finances.

The Department of Religious Affairs also appoints the Mufti of the Eritrean Muslim community, despite community protests. The government does not permit Muslim religious activities or groups it views as "radical." Government officials point to the actions of foreign or foreign-inspired Muslim fundamentalists, whom they believe are seeking to radicalize the traditional Eritrean practice of Islam and thus possibly create tensions in a society that is roughly half Christian and half Muslim.

Eritrean Refugees

The Eritrean government's oppression and human rights violations have forced hundreds of thousands of Eritreans to flee the country, mostly to Ethiopia and eastern Sudan. According to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, there were at least 200,000 Eritrean refugees in 2010. While the majority of Eritrean refugees are fleeing mandatory military service, UNHCR reports that increasingly large numbers are claiming religious persecution. Pentecostal Christians make up a large percentage of these cases, followed by Jehovah's Witnesses. Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports that the number of Eritrean Orthodox clergy leaving the country has increased since the government revoked their exemption from mandatory military service.

U.S. Policy

Relations between the United States and Eritrea remain poor. The U.S. government has long expressed concern about Eritrea's human rights practices and its activities in the region, including its support of Islamist insurgents in Somalia and its belligerent attitude toward U.S. ally Djibouti. The government of Eritrea expelled USAID in 2005, and U.S. programs in the country ended in fiscal year 2006. Since 2005,

the Eritrean government has detained 51 Eritrean citizens working for the U.S. embassy, many of whom were subsequently released, and it has refused to accredit the proposed new U.S. ambassador to the country since July 2010.

U.S. relations with Eritrea have been heavily influenced, often adversely, by strong U.S. ties with Ethiopia. After independence in 1993, Eritrea fought a costly border war with Ethiopia in 1998-2000. 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 2002 decision of an independent commission based at the International Court of Justice. The U.S. government views the commission's decision as "final and binding" and expects both parties to comply. The United States was the largest financial contributor to the now-defunct UN peacekeeping force—the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE)—separating the two armies. The UN Security Council terminated the mandate of UNMEE in July 2008 "in response to crippling restrictions imposed by Eritrea on UNMEE."

The State Department designated Eritrea a CPC under IRFA in September 2004. When renewing the CPC designation in September 2005, 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. This represents the only unique presidential action to be undertaken via the IRFA regime in response to a CPC designation anywhere in the world. 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.

In December 2009, the United States joined a 13-member majority on the UN Security Council in adopting Resolution 1907, sanctioning Eritrea for having "provided support to armed groups undermining peace and reconciliation in Somalia" as well as for not having withdrawn its forces 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 "engaged in acts that threaten the peace, security, or stability of Somalia, to have obstructed the delivery of humanitarian assistance to or within Somalia, to have supplied arms or related materiel in violation of the United Nations arms embargo on Somalia, or to have provided support for any of these activities." Among those listed was Yemane Ghebreab, head of political affairs and senior advisor on Somali issues for the Eritrean president.

Recommendations

In response to the policies and practices of Eritrea's government, the U.S. government should press for immediate improvements to end religious freedom violations in Eritrea and advance religious freedom through sanctions and other bilateral and multilateral efforts.

I. Pressing for Immediate Improvements to End Religious Freedom Violations

The U.S. government should urge the government of Eritrea to undertake immediately the following actions to improve respect for religious freedom in that country:

- unconditionally and immediately release detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities, and release the deposed Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios from house arrest and permit him to receive needed medical attention;

- implement the constitution's existing guarantees of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice, regardless of registration status;
- institute a voluntary registration process for religious groups that is transparent, non-discriminatory, not overly burdensome, and otherwise in accordance with international standards;
- promptly register those religious groups that comply with the requirements issued in 2002, and not require religious groups to provide identifying information on individual members;
- take official, public action to permit religious groups to resume their public religious activities pending registration, including reopening places of worship closed by the ban in 2002;
- issue a public order to the security forces reminding them that religious practice is not to be interfered with, except in those circumstances permitted by international law;
- allow for an alternative to mandatory military service for conscientious objectors; 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.

II. Advancing Religious Freedom through Sanctions

In addition to continuing to designate Eritrea as a CPC, the U.S. government should:

- 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 in response to their undermining of democratic institutions and engaging in gross human rights abuses, including abuses of religious freedom, in that country;
- 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, including, as appropriate, the President, the security forces and their officers, and the ruling party and ruling party officials; and
- maintain the denial of commercial export to Eritrea of defense articles and services covered by the Arms Control Export Act, with some items exempted, as announced by the Secretary of State in September 2005.

III. Advancing Religious Freedom through Other Bilateral and Multilateral Efforts

The U.S. government should:

- engage in vigorous advocacy of 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 there, including in multilateral fora such as the UN;
- seek the creation by the UN Human Rights Council of a Special Rapporteur position for Eritrea or, failing that, a visit to Eritrea by a team of thematic Special Rapporteurs, including the Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Opinion and Expression;
- condition any resumption of development assistance to Eritrea on measurable improvements in religious freedom and, if such assistance is to be resumed, ensure that it is directed to programs that contribute directly to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law;
- encourage unofficial dialogue with Eritreans on religious freedom issues, specifically by:
 - promoting a visit to Eritrea by U.S. leaders concerned with freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief to meet with Eritrean authorities and other opinion-makers and to facilitate dialogue among all of Eritrea's religious communities; and
 - expanding the use of educational and cultural exchanges, such as the Fulbright Program, the International Visitor Program, and lectures by visiting American scholars and experts, to introduce more Eritreans to the workings and benefits of societies in which religious freedom and other human rights are respected;
- seek the cooperation of other countries in promoting greater understanding by Eritreans of international standards regarding freedom of religion or belief;
- 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 International Boundary Commission that was established following the 1998-2000 war; and
- in the event of the future creation, as previously recommended by USCIRF, of an independent national human rights commission in Eritrea, work to ensure that such a commission receives appropriate technical training in human rights and the law, operates according to due process and international human rights standard and is established in accordance with the Paris Principles for such organizations, including independence, adequate funding, a representative character, and a broad mandate that includes freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief.