



# ERITREA

## Key Findings

Systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations continue in Eritrea under the regime of President Isaias Afwerki. Violations include torture or other ill-treatment of religious prisoners, arbitrary arrests and detentions without charges, a prolonged ban on public religious activities, and interference in the internal affairs of registered religious groups. The religious freedom 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 Muslim religious activities and those opposed to the government-appointed head of the Muslim community. In light of these violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2014 that Eritrea be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. Since 2004, USCIRF has recommended, and the State Department has designated, Eritrea as a CPC.

## Background

President Isaias and the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) have ruled Eritrea since the country gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Absolute authority is maintained by President Isaias and his circle, with all independent activity suppressed. Thousands of Eritreans with religious or civil society affiliations have been imprisoned for their real or imagined opposition to the government. 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 religion 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 the non-preferred religious communities provide detailed financial and membership information, as well as background on their activities in Eritrea. No religious group has been registered since 2002, although the

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Baha'i community, Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church, and Seventh-day Adventists have 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, the latter of whom are denied citizenship by an October 1994 Presidential Decree. Eritrean security forces conduct mass arrests of followers of these faiths, including at clandestine prayer meetings and religious ceremonies

## Religious Freedom Conditions 2013–2014 Repressive Environment

The government controls 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. Since December 2010, the Eritrean Department of Religious Affairs reportedly has instructed these groups to not accept 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 and hundreds of Muslims who protested this appointment remain imprisoned. In a reversal of policy, in 2010 the Eritrean government

oned on religious grounds in Eritrea during this reporting period. Reports of torture of religious prisoners as described above continue. The vast majority are Evangelical or Pentecostal Christians. Other notable religious prisoners include: the government-deposed Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios, who protested government interference in his church's affairs and has been under house arrest since 2007; 49 Jehovah's Witnesses detained without trial or administrative appeal, one-third of whom are over the age of

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began requiring all religious workers and leaders, including those from registered religious communities, to participate in national military service. Many religious leaders from the Catholic and Orthodox communities have protested this new decision, stating that military service violates their religious tenets.

### **Torture**

The government tortures and beats detainees imprisoned in violation of freedom of religion and related human rights. Released religious prisoners have reported to USCIRF and other human rights monitors of being confined in crowded conditions, such as in 20-foot metal shipping containers or underground barracks, and being subjected to extreme temperature fluctuations. Evangelicals and Pentecostals released from prison report being pressured to recant their faith in order to be freed. Persons detained for religious activities, in both short-term and long-term detentions, often 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.

### **Religious Prisoners**

The State Department, non-governmental human rights organizations, and Christian advocacy groups estimate that 2,000 to 3,000 persons remained impris-

60 and three of whom have been imprisoned for more than 15 years (see prisoner list in appendix); more than 180 Muslims detained for opposing the state's appointment of the Mufti of the Eritrean Muslim community; and other reformist members of the Orthodox clergy. During the past year, there were reports of deaths of religious prisoners, who were denied medical care, or who were subjected to other ill treatment.

Arbitrary arrests and short-term detentions of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians continued in 2013. Those released continue to report being pressured to recant their faith.

### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

Relations between the United States and Eritrea remain poor, despite some outreach to the Eritrean government by the United States. Nonetheless, the U.S. government should press for immediate improvements to curb religious freedom violations in Eritrea. In addition to recommending that the U.S. government continue to designate Eritrea as a CPC and maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a), USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Work to limit the Eritrean government's ability to levy and forcibly collect a "diaspora tax" on Eritreans living in the United States, and partner with other countries with an Eritrean diaspora community to ban similar forced "taxes;"

- Condition any resumption of assistance to the Eritrean government on measurable improvements in religious freedom and other human rights conditions 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;
- Urge the government of Eritrea to: unconditionally and immediately release all religious prisoners, including Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios; make registration voluntary for religious groups and promptly register groups that comply with the 2002 requirements; and allow visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention;
- Encourage a visit by U.S. and international religious leaders to facilitate dialogue among all of Eritrea's religious communities 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;
- Work with other nations, especially those with mining interests in Eritrea and large diaspora communities from Eritrea, to draw attention to religious freedom abuses in Eritrea and advocate for the release of religious prisoners; and
- Further target assistance to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and nongovernmental organizations to provide support to Eritrean asylum-seekers who have fled the country, especially those with psychosocial needs due to torture and other ill-treatment.