



# ERITREA

## Key Findings

Systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations continue in Eritrea. 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 2015 that Eritrea be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Since

of Eritreans are imprisoned for their real or imagined opposition to the government, and torture and forced labor are extensive. No private newspapers, political opposition parties, or independent non-governmental organizations exist, and independent public gatherings are prohibited. The government requires all physically- and mentally-capable people between the ages of 18 and 70 to perform national service, including military training and/or service, which is full time and indefinite. The national service requirement does not include a provision or alternative for conscientious objectors. Persons who fail to participate in the national service are detained, sentenced to hard labor, abused, and have their legal documents confiscated.

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;

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2004, USCIRF has recommended, and the State Department has designated, Eritrea as a CPC, most recently in July 2014.

## 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. President Isaias and his circle maintain absolute authority and suppress all independent activity. Thousands

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 information about their finances, membership, activities, and benefit to the country.

There are no reliable statistics of religious affiliation in Eritrea. The Pew Charitable Trust estimates that Orthodox Christians comprise approximately 57 percent of the population, Muslims 36 percent, Roman Catholics 4 percent, and Protestants, including Evangelical

Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and others, 1 percent.

No religious group has been registered since the registration requirement was imposed in 2002, although the Baha'i community, Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church, and Seventh-day Adventists have all submitted the required applications when the registration law was first enacted. As a result of the registration requirement and the government's inaction on applications, unregistered religious communities lack a legal basis on which to practice their faiths publicly, including holding services 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 routinely arrest followers of these faiths, including at clandestine prayer meetings and religious ceremonies.

## **Religious Freedom Conditions 2014-2015**

### **Torture and Other Abuses**

The government regularly tortures and beats political and religious prisoners, however, religious prisoners are sent to the harshest prisons and receive some of the cruelest punishments. Released religious prisoners have reported to USCIRF and other human rights monitors that they were confined in crowded conditions, such as in 20-foot metal shipping containers or underground

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 government continued to arrest and detain followers of unregistered religious communities. While the country's closed nature makes exact numbers difficult to determine, recent estimates suggest 1,200 to 3,000 persons are imprisoned on religious grounds in Eritrea, the vast majority of whom are Evangelical or Pentecostal Christians. Reports of torture and other abuses of religious prisoners as described above continue. Known 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; 64 Jehovah's Witnesses detained without trial, including three who have been imprisoned for more than 20 years (see 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 subjected to other ill treatment.

### **Repressive Environment**

The government controls the internal affairs of the four recognized religions, including appointing religious

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barracks, and 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, are not formally charged, permitted access to legal counsel,

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 has reportedly 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 began requiring all clergy, including those from registered religious communities, to participate in national military service regardless of their conscientious objections to such service. In this reporting period, USCIRF received reports that Eritrean officials visiting the United States pressured diaspora members only to attend Eritrean government-approved Orthodox churches in this country.

### **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 longstanding conflict with Ethiopia. The government of Eritrea expelled USAID in 2005, and U.S. programs in the country ended in

in the country. The Commission has not been allowed into Eritrea to conduct its research, but has been meeting with Eritrean diaspora, refugees, experts, and human rights activists outside of the country. Its final report is due in June 2015.

The State Department designated Eritrea a CPC under IRFA in September 2004. When renewing the CPC designation in September 2005 and January 2009, 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. 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. The State Department most recently re-designated Eritrea as a CPC in July 2014, and continued the presidential action of the arms embargo, although since 2011 this has been under the auspices of UN Security Council resolution 1907 (see below).

U.S. policy toward Eritrea is also concentrated on the country's activities to destabilize the Horn of

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fiscal year 2006. Eritrea receives no U.S. development, humanitarian, or security assistance. Since 2010, the government has refused to accredit a new U.S. ambassador to the country; in response the U.S. government revoked the credentials of the Eritrean ambassador to the United States.

U.S. government officials routinely raise religious freedom abuses when speaking about human rights conditions in Eritrea. The United States was a co-sponsor of a 2012 UN Human Rights Council resolution that successfully created the position of Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea. In July 2014, the United States supported the creation of a Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea to investigate systematic violations of human rights, recommend how to improve conditions and ensure accountability, and raise awareness of the situation

Africa. In December 2009, the United States joined a 13-member majority on the UN Security Council in adopting Resolution 1907, sanctioning Eritrea for supporting armed groups in Somalia and failing to withdraw its forces from the Eritrean-Djibouti border 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 for their financing of al-Shabaab in Somalia, including Yemane Ghebreab, the former head of political affairs and senior advisor on Somali issues for the Eritrean president. In December 2011, the United States voted in favor of

UN Security Council Resolution 2023, which calls on UN member states to implement Resolution 1907's sanctions and ensure that their dealings with Eritrea's mining industry do not support activities which would destabilize the region.

UN resolution 1907 also condemns Eritrea's two-percent tax on Eritreans living outside of the country, which it noted is used "for purposes such as procuring arms and related materiel for transfer to armed opposition groups." The Eritrean government relies heavily on this tax to boost its poor economy and fund national defense. U.S. government officials, the UN Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group, and Eritrean diaspora in the United States and other coun-

in 22 CFR 126.1(a), USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Continue to use diplomatic channels to urge the government of Eritrea to: release unconditionally and immediately detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities, including Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios; 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 Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, Special Rapporteur on

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tries report that those who refuse to pay are subject to threats, intimidation, and coercion, and their families in Eritrea are also harassed. In 2011, the United Kingdom suspended collection of this tax stating that it may contravene the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. In 2012 the Eritrean consulate in Ottawa, Canada agreed to stop collecting the tax after Canadian threats to remove the Eritrean Ambassador. This move corresponds with Canadian efforts to make it illegal to finance the Eritrean military in compliance with UNSC Resolution 1907. The Netherlands and Germany are also considering ending the collection of the diaspora tax within their territories.

## 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. In addition to recommending that the U.S. government should continue to designate Eritrea as a CPC and maintaining the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced

human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and International Red Cross;

- Work to limit the Eritrean government's ability to levy and forcibly collect a diaspora tax on Eritreans living in the United States by imposing visas bans on Eritrean officials who violate UN resolution 1907 and/or engage in human rights abuses related to the collection of the diaspora tax in the United States, and partner with other countries with Eritrean diaspora communities to ban similar forced taxes;
- Encourage unofficial dialogue with Eritrean authorities on religious freedom issues by promoting a visit by U.S. and international religious leaders to facilitate dialogue with 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 Eritrean diaspora communities, to draw attention to religious freedom abuses in Eritrea and advocate for the unconditional and immediate release of religious prisoners, including Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios; and
- Increase assistance to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and non-governmental organizations to provide support to Eritrean refugees with psychosocial needs due to torture and other ill-treatment.

