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INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



**Annual Report of the  
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**

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**ON THE COVER:** Members of Pakistan's Women Action Forum in Lahore, Pakistan rally against the presence of Taliban and militants in the northwest of Pakistan on Thursday, February 12, 2009. The banners condemn religious extremism, domestic violence, and the burning down of girls' schools in Swat. (AP Photo/K.M. Chaudary)

## Eritrea

The government of Eritrea continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Violations include arbitrary arrests and detention without charge of members of unregistered religious groups, and the torture or other ill-treatment of hundreds of persons on account of their religion, sometimes resulting in death. Other serious concerns continue to include the prolonged ban on public religious activities by all religious groups that are not officially recognized, closure by the authorities of the places of worship of these religious groups, inordinate delays in acting on registration applications by religious groups, and the disruption of private religious and even social gatherings of members of unregistered groups. Since February 2004, the Commission has recommended that the State Department designate Eritrea as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC. The State Department did so in September 2004, September 2005, November 2006, and January 2009. (The gap between November 2006 and January 2009 resulted from an absence of new designations rather than any improvement in conditions in 2007 or 2008.) Because religious freedom conditions have remained severe in the past year, with new mass arrests of members of unregistered churches, a renewed campaign of arrests of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and reportedly thousands of long-term religious prisoners, both Christian and Muslim, the Commission continues to recommend that Eritrea remain a CPC.

In September 2005, when renewing the CPC designation, then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced the denial of commercial export to Eritrea of defense articles and services covered by the Arms Control Export Act, with some items exempted. This was the first unique presidential action to be undertaken under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) in response to a CPC designation.

Eritrea has been ruled by the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) since the country gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993 following a lengthy war. After an initially promising start toward democratization, the PFDJ government

has become increasingly repressive, with power concentrated in the hands of the President and a small cadre of associates who fought in the liberation struggle. In 2001, the government suspended implementation of a democratic constitution, canceled elections, curtailed press freedom, began a crackdown on political opponents, and restricted religious groups it perceived as undermining national unity. The government maintains the country on a near-war footing, reportedly anticipating renewed hostilities with Ethiopia.

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. Although there is no state religion, the government has close ties to the Orthodox Church, the largest and oldest of Eritrea’s Christian communities, and is hostile toward newer Christian groups—in particular, Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations.

Government officials have criticized “non-traditional” Christian denominations for engaging in evangelism that is allegedly socially divisive, aggressive, and alien to Eritrea’s cultural traditions. Government officials have also pointed to the actions of foreign or foreign-inspired Muslim fundamentalists as seeking to radicalize traditional Eritrean practice of Islam and thus create tensions in a society that is roughly half Christian and half Muslim. Government concerns regarding foreign backing of religious groups have resulted in strict controls both on humanitarian activities by international faith-based organizations and on foreign funding to indigenous groups for reportedly religious or charitable activities.

In 2002, the government imposed a registration requirement on religious groups other than the four “sanctioned” religions, requiring detailed financial and membership information, as well as background on their presence in Eritrea. Among those affected were Protestant Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian denominations, as well as the Baha’is. Some of these faith communities have operated in Eritrea for several decades. Jehovah’s

Witnesses were not offered the opportunity to register. By stipulating that there could be no public religious activities until registration has been approved by the government, the decree effectively closed places of worship and prohibited public religious activities, including worship services, of all unregistered religious communities. Although some groups submitted the required applications, none have been approved to date. 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.

As part of the campaign against the religious activities of those persons not belonging to officially recognized religious denominations, Eritrean security forces have disrupted private worship, conducted mass arrests of participants at religious weddings, prayer meetings, and other gatherings, and detained those arrested without charge for indefinite periods of time. Because of government restrictions, it is difficult to determine the precise number of persons imprisoned for their practice of or participation in religious activities, and releases sometimes go unreported; however, the State Department reports that "hundreds of followers of various unregistered churches" were "detained, harassed, and abused" during the past year. For example, in November 2008 there were reports of arrests of over 110 members of unregistered churches in Barentu, Dekemhare, Mendefera, and Abi-Kuala. In December 2008, approximately 50 members of unregistered churches were reportedly arrested in Asmara over a two-week period. In January 2009, 15 members of one unregistered church were arrested in Keren. A total of 180 Muslims are reportedly imprisoned, some for as long as 15 years, due to their opposition to the government-appointed mufti. Some prisoners, both Christians and Muslims, are believed to be held at military training camps.

Persons detained for religious activities often were not formally charged, permitted access to legal counsel, accorded due process, or allowed access to their families. Some prisoners were released after detentions of several days or less,

but others spent longer periods in detention. The government held individuals who were jailed on account of their religious affiliation at a variety of venues, including facilities administered by the military. There are credible reports, including during the past year, that the security forces have used coercion on detainees to secure repudiations of faith; some prisoners were required to recant their religious beliefs as a precondition of release. During the past year, there have been occasional reports of deaths of religious prisoners who refused to recant their beliefs and who were denied medical care or otherwise subjected to ill treatment. Detainees imprisoned in violation of freedom of religion and related human rights have reportedly been beaten, tortured, confined in crowded conditions, or subjected to extreme temperature fluctuations.

Government violations of religious freedom are alleged to be particularly severe in the armed forces. During the war with Ethiopia, some Eritrean soldiers accepted various forms of Protestantism, reportedly alarming government officials and leading to the banning of prayer meetings among armed forces members. Attendance at such meetings is punishable by imprisonment. Moreover, armed forces members and national service inductees reportedly face severe punishment for possession of religious literature, including Bibles.

Since 1994, the government of Eritrea has denied a range of government services and civil and political rights to members of the country's small community of Jehovah's Witnesses. Many Jehovah's Witnesses refused on religious grounds to participate in the 1993 referendum on independence or to accept the national military service required of all citizens, both male and female. The government chose to interpret these actions as a rejection of Eritrean citizenship. In accordance with a presidential decree issued in October 1994, Jehovah's Witnesses have been barred from obtaining government jobs, business licenses, and government-issued identity and travel documents. Lack of Eritrean identity cards prevents Jehovah's Witnesses from obtaining legal recognition of marriages and land purchases.

The requirement of a military training component for secondary school graduation 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.

Over 40 Jehovah's Witnesses are currently being detained in Eritrea without trial or administrative appeal, in violation of minimal rights to due process. Although the maximum legal penalty for refusing to perform national service is two years, some Jehovah's Witnesses who have refused to serve in the military have been detained for over a decade. Individual members of the Jehovah's Witnesses are regularly arrested and imprisoned for expressing their faith to others. Some are quickly released, while others are held indefinitely without charge. In a series of arrests beginning in July 2008 and extending into January 2009, 25 Jehovah's Witnesses, mostly adult males with families, were detained with no reason given for their arrests.

Since 2005, the government has intervened in the internal affairs of the (Coptic) Orthodox Church of Eritrea, including by appointing a lay administrator for the Church and, in May 2007, engineering the replacement of Orthodox Patriarch Antonios with a more compliant successor. Security forces have targeted reformist elements in the Orthodox Church, arresting religious activists and preventing their meetings. Patriarch Antonios is reportedly under a strict form of house arrest and is being denied medical care.

The government's concerns regarding religious activities appear to be linked to real or perceived security threats, and government spokespersons have cited Pentecostals, along with Muslim extremists, as threats to national security. Before Eritrea and Sudan normalized relations in 2006, Islamic militants operating out of Sudan engaged in a low-level insurgency against the Eritrean government, occasionally employing terrorism as a tactic in their campaign to establish an

Islamic state. International human rights organizations report, however, that many of the Muslims detained without charge are non-violent critics of alleged anti-Muslim discrimination or of the government-recognized leadership of the Muslim community. None of the suspected Christian groups are known to have engaged in or advocated violence.

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

As a consequence of the designation of Eritrea as a CPC, the Commission again recommends that the U.S. government should:

- 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;
- 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 United Nations; and
- thoroughly review development assistance to Eritrea and condition any resumption of development assistance to Eritrea on measurable improvements in religious freedom; 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.

With regard to religious freedom conditions in Eritrea, the Commission has recommended that the U.S. government should:

- urge the government of Eritrea to undertake the following actions to improve respect for religious freedom in that country by:
  - releasing detainees held solely on account of their peaceful religious activities;
  - implementing the constitution's existing guarantees of freedom of thought, conscience,

- and religion, including the freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice;
- instituting a registration process for religious groups that is transparent, non-discriminatory, not overly burdensome, and otherwise in accordance with international standards;
  - promptly registering those religious groups that comply with the requirements issued in 2002, and not requiring religious groups to provide identifying information on individual members;
  - taking official, public action to permit religious groups to resume their public religious activities pending registration, including reopening of places of worship closed by the ban in 2002;
  - issuing 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; and
  - extending an official invitation for visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention;
- encourage unofficial dialogue with Eritreans on religious freedom issues, specifically by:
    - the promotion of a visit to Eritrea by U.S. leaders concerned with freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief in order to meet with Eritrean authorities and other opinion-makers and to facilitate dialogue among all of Eritrea's religious communities;
- the expanded use of educational and cultural exchanges, such as the Fulbright Program, the International Visitor Program, and lectures by visiting American scholars and experts, in order 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
  - support, and offer to provide funding for, the creation of an independent human rights commission in Eritrea, in line with the Paris Principles<sup>1</sup> for such organizations, including independence, adequate funding, a representative character, and a broad mandate that includes freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief.

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<sup>1</sup> *Principles Relating to the Status and Functioning of National Institutions for Protection and Promotion of Human Rights*, found in the Annex to *Fact Sheet No. 19, National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights*, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu6/2/fs19.htm>).