

Eritrea

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
800 North Capitol Street, NW Suite 790
Washington, DC 20002

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Eritrea, with a population roughly half Christian and half Muslim, is poised on a major African cultural and religious fault-line. Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993 following a 30-year struggle. Eritrea's leaders have been molded by their experiences in that struggle in which discipline and unity were deemed crucial for survival and eventual success. After five brief years of peace, Eritrea was again at war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000, a costly conflict¹ that curtailed earlier progress toward economic development and political liberalization. Following a political crackdown in late 2001, dissent has been suppressed, plans for democratic elections have been shelved indefinitely, and the Constitution, although ratified, has not yet been implemented. Eritrea today is a single-party dictatorship, lacking the democratic foundations of free and fair national elections, an independent press, lawful political opposition, civil society, and indigenous human rights organizations. The government has kept the country on a near-war footing in the face of a continuing perceived threat to Eritrea's national existence from Ethiopia.

Although spared much of the inter-communal strife seen elsewhere in Africa, Eritrea has in recent years experienced serious erosion of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, as well as of other basic human rights. In the face of real and perceived external and internal threats, including by foreign-backed Islamic extremists, the Eritrean government has sought to impose discipline on religious life, as on almost all other aspects of the nation's existence. In doing so, the government has targeted a number of small, minority religious communities with no history of violence or subversion. Those affected lack legal avenues for redress of violations of Eritrea's own international obligations to protect human rights, including freedom of religion and belief.

In February 2004, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom publicly recommended, for the first time, that Eritrea be designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) for systematic and egregious violations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief. The State Department subsequently acted on that recommendation, designating Eritrea as a CPC on September 15, 2004. The State Department's annual International Religious Freedom Report, issued the same day, made the judgment that an already serious situation in Eritrea had "continued to deteriorate." Other information available to the Commission, including detailed and credible accounts of violations of freedom of religion, reinforced this conclusion.

In October 2004, Commission staff visited Eritrea. During a six-day visit, staff discussed the situation there with government officials, leading members of Eritrea's sanctioned and unregistered faiths, third-country diplomats, United Nations personnel, resident representatives of foreign relief organizations, and others. Meetings with independent journalists and human rights monitors, normally a staple of such visits, were not possible, since the government does not permit such journalists and monitors to function. The staff visit confirmed the existence of the systematic and egregious violations that led to the CPC designation.

Background

In contrast to the country's material poverty,² Eritrea has a rich religious heritage. Both Christianity and Islam were introduced early in their respective histories. Eritrea's population of approximately 4 million is usually described as roughly half Christian, mostly Coptic, and half Muslim, almost entirely Sunni.³ The overwhelming majority of the Christian population belongs to the Eritrean Orthodox Church, an autonomous

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branch of the Coptic Orthodox faith, which is closely tied to Eritrea's history, culture, and national identity. Also included in the Christian population are Roman Catholics and Protestants, the latter including various Evangelical and Pentecostal groups. There are also followers of indigenous African faiths and a small Baha'i community. Due to emigration, Eritrea's resident Jewish community now consists of only a handful of individuals, all foreign passport holders, although a synagogue is still maintained in Asmara and used for worship, mainly by expatriates and other visitors.

Relations between members of Eritrea's two largest faiths, Coptic Christianity and Sunni Islam, generally have been amicable. Eritrea's historical experience has underlined the importance of avoiding division along religious lines. The long struggle with Ethiopia led many Eritreans, whether Christians or Muslims, to work together to build one nation out of their multi-religious and multi-ethnic society.

The prevailing view of an Eritrean identity transcending religious differences has been challenged by a relatively small number of Muslim militants. Eritrean officials report that, following independence, foreign Muslim groups sought to import an intolerant Wahhabi ideology from Saudi Arabia under the cover of ostensibly charitable and educational work. Government officials have also alleged that there were efforts to introduce the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴ According to government officials, these groups preached against co-existence with Christianity and sought to radicalize Eritrea's traditional, popular Islam, which has been much influenced by Sufism. Jihadists, allegedly backed by Sudan, called for the establishment of an Islamic state and undertook terrorist activities, the threat of which continues today. They also promoted the perception among some Muslims that they actually constitute a majority of the population and are disadvantaged under the current regime, seen by Muslims as dominated by individuals with a Christian background.

In recent years there have also been tensions between some followers of the ancient Coptic Orthodox faith practiced by most Eritrean Christians and those

following other expressions of Christianity. Eritrea, like much of sub-Saharan Africa, has witnessed an upsurge in charismatic and Pentecostal forms of Christianity, which are viewed with suspicion by traditionalists, particularly but not exclusively in the Coptic Orthodox community. During the Commission staff visit in October 2004, representatives of Eritrea's sanctioned Christian denominations complained of aggressive proselytizing by newer groups competing for the allegiance of their young people and allegedly threatening social disruption by dividing families. Government officials have equated the exclusive claims to salvation preached by some of the newer faiths with the intolerance of religious diversity taught by Islamic fundamentalists. In contrast to the Jihadists, however, none of the charismatic or Pentecostal Christian groups is known to have engaged in or to have advocated violence.

Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief

Unlike nearby Saudi Arabia and neighboring Sudan, Eritrea is a secular state. There is no state or official religion. Following independence in 1993, the government of Eritrea initially pursued a non-confrontational policy toward religious groups, with the exception of the Jehovah's Witnesses, treated in greater detail below. The Constitution provides strong guarantees for religious freedom. According to Article 19, "Every person shall have the right to freedom of thought,



Orthodox church tower in Asmara

Commission

RECOMMENDATIONS

For U.S. Policy

- I. **The U.S. government should engage in vigorous advocacy on 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 in Eritrea, including in multilateral fora such as the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.**
- II. **The U.S. government should urge the government of Eritrea to undertake the following actions to improve the religious freedom situation in that country:**
 - Implementation of the Constitution's existing guarantees of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice;
 - Institution of a registration process for religious groups that is transparent, non-discriminatory, not overly burdensome, and otherwise in accordance with international standards;
 - Prompt registration of those religious groups that comply with the requirements issued in 2002; religious groups should not be required to provide identifying information on individual members;
 - Official, public action by the Eritrean authorities to permit religious groups to resume their public religious activities pending registration, including reopening of places of worship closed by the ban in 2002;
 - Issuance of 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;
 - Release of detainees held solely on account of their peaceful religious activities; and
 - Increased engagement by the Eritrean authorities with the international community regarding respect for freedom of religion or belief, including by making 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.
- III. **The U.S. government should encourage unofficial dialogue with Eritreans on religious freedom issues, specifically by:**
 - The promotion of visits 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 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; and
 - Support for a conference that would bring together international experts, government officials, and representatives of international organizations, religious communities, and civil society to discuss international human rights standards and best practices related to a) the registration of religious organizations and b) conscientious objection to military service.
- IV. **The U.S. government should seek the cooperation of other countries in promoting greater understanding by Eritreans of international standards regarding freedom of religion or belief.**
- V. **In order to expand Eritrean citizens' currently limited access to remedies for human rights violations, the U.S. government should support, and offer to provide funding for, the creation of an independent human rights commission in Eritrea, in line with the Paris Principles¹⁰ for such organizations, including independence, adequate funding, a representative character, and a broad mandate that includes freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief.**

conscience and belief” and “Every person shall have the freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice.” Moreover, under the Constitution’s guarantee of equality under the law, “no person may be discriminated against” on the basis of a number of criteria, including specifically “religion.” Although the Constitution was officially ratified by Eritrea’s Constituent Assembly in May 1997, the Constitution’s provisions for fundamental freedoms have not been enforced.

RESTRICTIVE REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS

Starting in the late 1990’s, as rising tensions and occasional incidents of violence occurred between Orthodox community members and the followers of newer Christian groups, the government began to view the latter as a potential threat to national unity. In May 2002, the government imposed a registration requirement on religious groups and ordered the closure of places of worship and the cessation of public religious activities, including worship services, pending registration. Each religious group applying for approval was required to provide detailed financial and membership information, as well as background on the group’s presence in Eritrea.

Exempted from the ban and from the strict requirements for registration were four “sanctioned” faiths, probably representing over 98 percent of the population: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Lutheran-affiliated Evangelical Church of Eritrea. The latter two provided an umbrella for some smaller Christian groups, such as Asmara’s sole Anglican church.

Affected by the ban were a number of evangelical and Pentecostal Protestant denominations, as well as the Baha’is. Although some of these groups are relatively new to Eritrea, having been introduced during Ethiopia’s rule, others, such as the Kale Hiwot (“Word of Life”) Church and the Baha’is, go back to the Italian colonial period.

As of this writing, the government has failed to approve any requests for registration, although some groups are known to

have complied with all the requirements. Some other groups partially complied, but refused to provide names and addresses of individual members asserting concern that such personal information might be used to facilitate their arrest.

ARRESTS AND DETENTIONS

As a consequence of the public religious activities of those persons not belonging to officially recognized religious denominations, Eritrean security forces have disrupted private worship, have conducted mass arrests of participants at prayer meetings and other gatherings of people of faith, and have detained those arrested without charge for indefinite periods of time. Hundreds of members of unregistered churches are believed to be detained at any given time, typically without charge, even for extended periods.⁵ Among those detained have been the elderly and persons in ill health.

Commission staff met with former detainees and heard first-person accounts of their incarceration. Staff heard credible reports that the security forces have used coercion on detainees to secure repudiation of their faith and such coercion has included physical mistreatment. Although Commission staff were not able to confirm such reports directly, repression of unauthorized religious activities is reported to be particularly severe in the armed forces. Almost all allegations of religious freedom violations are routinely denied or ignored by the Eritrean authorities, who have not permitted investigations by international human rights groups.

Following Eritrea’s designation as a CPC, there have been several reports of new arrests and detentions in late 2004 and early 2005. Among those recently arrested were not only Evangelical or Pentecostal pastors and activists, but also a few reform-minded Orthodox and Roman Catholics. Private religious gatherings for Bible study or prayer were raided. Also reported were mass arrests, sometimes involving scores of people, at social events such as a New Year’s Eve party, a wedding, and a wedding reception, whose attendees were predominantly from one or more of the unregistered religious groups.



Mosque in Asmara

THE JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES

Jehovah’s Witnesses have been the particular target of official repression, as well as societal discrimination, in Eritrea. Many in Eritrea’s small community of 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. Eritrea does not recognize the right of conscientious objection or provide for alternative national service not having a military component.⁶ Some Jehovah’s Witnesses have been imprisoned, without charge, for 10 years for refusing national service.

The government chose to interpret these actions by Jehovah’s Witnesses as a rejection of Eritrean citizenship, issuing a Presidential decree to this effect in October 1994. This decree ordered Jehovah’s Witnesses be denied government jobs, business licenses, and government-issued identity and travel documents. Any such existing employment, license, or document was to be terminated. Lack of Eritrean identity cards effectively denies Jehovah’s Witnesses a range of government services, including legal recognition of marriages and land purchases. These actions, which continue, are customarily taken without due process of law or any administrative appeal. Moreover, the requirement of a military training component for secondary school graduation effectively denies educational and employment opportunities to young Jehovah’s Witnesses, encouraging many to flee their homeland.

Jehovah's Witnesses were not among the groups offered the opportunity to register when the government announced the new registration procedure in 2002. Like other unregistered groups, the Jehovah's Witnesses are not permitted public religious activities. Meetings by Jehovah's Witnesses in private homes are disrupted by the authorities.

U.S. Relations with Eritrea

U.S.-Eritrean relations have been heavily influenced by past and current U.S. ties with Ethiopia.⁷ The United States opposed self-determination for Eritrea in the early 1950's, favoring instead Eritrea's union with then Cold War ally Ethiopia. The United States quickly recognized Eritrea's independence, however, following a popular referendum in 1993. U.S. assistance had a major emphasis on rule of law, democracy, and good governance prior to renewed hostilities with Ethiopia in 1998. In December 2000, the United States, the United Nations, the European Union, and the African Union's predecessor, the Organization of African Unity, were formal witnesses to the Algiers Peace Agreements ending the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia.⁷ The United States is the largest financial contributor to a costly UN peacekeeping operation – the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) – separating the two armies.⁸ The United States also has contributed substantially, and continues to do so, to ameliorate the humanitarian crisis caused by the 1998-2000 war and by prolonged drought.⁹

Eritrean-Ethiopian relations remain tense due to Ethiopia's refusal to permit demarcation of the boundary according to the decision of April 2002 by an independent commission based at the International Court of Justice. The generally perceived threat of Ethiopia, intensified by Ethiopia's refusal to cooperate in implementing the international decision on border demarcation, undercuts support among Eritreans for a change in the government's current authoritarian policies, including curbs on religious freedom. The current impasse could result in renewed hostilities, with potentially high human costs.

VI. The U.S. government should conduct a review of development assistance to Eritrea with the aim of redirecting such assistance to programs that contribute directly to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Increases in other forms of development assistance should depend on measurable improvements in religious freedom, including those outlined in Recommendation 2.

VII. The U.S. government should 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 established following the 1998-2000 war.¹¹

Almost all allegations of religious freedom violations are routinely denied or ignored by the Eritrean authorities, who have not permitted investigations by international human rights groups.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

The government of Eritrea has reacted strongly to mounting criticism by the U.S. government regarding religious freedom violations. The Embassy of Eritrea in Washington has maintained publicly that the U.S. government has based its evaluation of the religious freedom situation in Eritrea on false reports fabricated by groups hostile to Eritrea. On the contrary, the Commission's findings, based on a careful consideration of the evidence, including information gathered on the October 2004 staff visit to the country, indicate that systematic and egregious violations are occurring.

The Eritrean government has recently shown some willingness to engage the U.S. government and the European Union (EU) on religious issues. Although not all meeting requests were granted, Commission staff were received at a high level by the government and were briefed by the Department of Religious Affairs. The same week as the staff visit, Ambassadors of EU member countries represented in Asmara met as a group

with the Department of Religious Affairs to discuss religious freedom issues within the framework of an ongoing EU-Eritrean political dialogue.

Designation of Eritrea as a Country of Particular Concern

In September 2004, the Commission welcomed the State Department's acceptance of its recommendation that Eritrea be designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). The State Department has continued to discuss violations of freedom of religion and belief with Eritrea during an IRFA-mandated consultation period that expired on March 15. No positive steps were taken by the government of Eritrea during this consultation period. Officials have not yet registered any of the religious groups whose places of worship have been closed and public religious activities prohibited pending compliance with registration requirements imposed in 2002.

The recent series of arrests and detentions without charge of clergy and others engaged in the practice of their faith has drawn renewed attention to the situation.

IRFA requires the President to take action to oppose religious freedom violations in CPC countries through a flexible menu of options provided in the statute. Such action must be taken within 180 days of CPC designation. In February 2005, the Commission recommended specific steps that the President should take, Recommendations 1 and 6 below. When the deadline to take action passed on March 15, 2005, the State Department announced that it would be asking Congress for additional time to finalize required actions under IRFA. The Commission believes that delays in the process serve only to signal that the U.S. government does not take seriously its stated, and mandated, commitments to promote religious freedom and other human rights throughout the world. ❧



Map of Eritrea

TO CONTACT THE COMMISSION: **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**

800 North Capitol St., NW, Suite 790
Washington, DC 20002
Web site: www.uscifr.gov
E-mail: communications@uscifr.gov
Voice: 202-523-3240
Fax: 202-523-5020

For further information on this issue, contact:

STEPHEN R. SNOW, SENIOR POLICY ANALYST
202.523.3240, ext. 21 • ssnow@uscifr.gov

¹ Although precise figures are unavailable, Eritrea may have suffered 100,000 casualties and a million internally displaced persons, in addition to the costs of integrating as many as 75,000 Eritreans or persons of Eritrean background expelled by Ethiopia.

² Eritrea ranks 156th on the United Nations Human Development Index of 177 countries surveyed. The Index is available on-line at http://hdr.unep.org/statistics/data/indic/indic_12_1_1.html.

³ Exact figures are unavailable. Eritrean identity documents do not indicate religious affiliation.

⁴ An international political movement founded in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood advocates that the state should be based on Islamic law. Some factions of the Muslim Brotherhood have engaged in violence.

⁵ Most detainees are subsequently released. Typically no charges are brought, whatever the length of the detention. Statements made to Commission staff by unregistered church leaders in Asmara tracked closely with the State Department's 2004 International Religious Freedom Report, which states "There are numerous credible reports that over 400 members of non-sanctioned religious groups have been detained or imprisoned. Government restrictions make it difficult to determine the precise number of current religious prisoners, but it is likely over 200."

⁶ Many Jehovah's Witnesses object to military service on religious grounds but would accept alternative civilian service. For international standards on conscientious objection to military service see *Civil and Political Rights, including the Question of Conscientious Objection to Military Service*, Report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Doc. E/CN.4/2004/55,

February 16, 2004; United Nations Commission on Human Rights, *Conscientious Objection to Military Service*, UN Doc. E/CN.4/Res/1998/77, April 22, 1998; Human Rights Committee, *General Comment 22 (48) (Art.18)*, UN Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4 (1993), ¶11, July 30, 1993.

⁷ UN Doc. A/55/686-S/2000/1183.

⁸ With a current strength of 3875 military personnel, 233 international civilians, and 262 local civilians, UNMEE has an annual budget of over \$200 million. The United States pays 27 percent of the cost of UN peacekeeping operations. Further information on UNMEE is available at www.unmeeonline.org.

⁹ According to the State Department's March 2005 *Background Note* for Eritrea, "In FY 2004, the United States provided over \$65 million in humanitarian aid to Eritrea, including \$58.1 million in food assistance and \$3.47 million in refugee support."

¹⁰ 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.unhcr.ch/html/menu6/2/fs19.htm>, accessed January 31, 2005).

¹¹ See United Nations Security Council Resolution 1586, March 14, 2005, UN Doc. S/RES/1586 (2005): "The Security Council...calls on the witnesses to the Algiers Agreements to play a more concerted and active role to facilitate their full implementation." A U.S. contribution to the peaceful resolution of the border dispute would give the U.S. government greater leverage with Eritrea on reforms, including on religious freedom issues.