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Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government continued to harass, detain, and discriminate against members of the small community of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Citizens generally are very tolerant of one another in the practice of their religion; however, societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses are the exception to this widespread tolerance. During the period covered by this report, there was a slight reduction in societal hostility toward Jehovah's Witnesses.

The U.S. Embassy meets regularly with leaders of the religious community and the Government's director of religious affairs. Embassy officers have raised the case of Jehovah's Witnesses with government officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 48,489 square miles, and its population is approximately 3.5 million. Although reliable statistics are not available, approximately 50 percent of the population are Sunni Muslim and approximately 40 percent are Orthodox Christian. The population also includes a small number of Eastern Rite and Roman Catholics (5 percent), Protestants (2 percent), smaller numbers of Seventh-Day Adventists, and less than 1,500 members of Jehovah's Witnesses. A small minority, perhaps 2 percent, practices traditional indigenous religions. Also present in very small numbers are practicing Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is. Generally the population in eastern and western lowlands predominantly is Muslim, and in the highlands the population predominantly is Christian. There are very few atheists. Religious participation is high among all groups.

Within the country's geographic, ethnic, and political concentrations, the majority of members of the Tigrinya ethnic group are Orthodox Christian, with the exception of the Djiberti Tigrinya, who are Muslim. The majority of the Tigre, Saho, Nara, Afar, Rashaida, Beja, and Blen ethnic groups are Muslim. A majority of the Kunama are Roman Catholics or Muslims, and some are practitioners of traditional indigenous religions. Approximately 40 percent of the Blen are Christian, the majority of whom are Catholic. The majority of members of the Kunama ethnic group are Catholic, Muslim, and practitioners of traditional indigenous religions. The central and southern highland areas, which generally are more economically developed than the lowlands, predominantly are populated by Christian Tigrinyas, and also some Muslim Djiberti and Saho. The Afar and Rashaida ethnic groups, and some of the Saho and Tigre ethnic groups live in the eastern lowlands. The Blen live on the border between the western lowlands and the central highlands and are concentrated in the Keren area, which also includes a significant minority of Tigre and Tigrinya speakers. The Beja, Kunama, Nara, and the majority of Tigre live in the western lowlands.

Some foreign missionaries operate in the country, including representatives of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim faiths. There are also several international religious nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) that provide humanitarian aid, including Caritas, Dutch Interchurch Aid, Lutheran Church Aid, and the Mufti's Relief Organization, the relief arm of the Muslim religion. Catholic Relief Services began operating in the country during the period covered by this report.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses. The Constitution provides for the freedom to practice any religion and to "manifest such practice," and Islam and Christianity are practiced widely and tolerated throughout the country with persons free to worship at the mosque or church of their choice; however, the Government continued to harass, detain, and discriminate against members of the small community of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Government does not require religious groups to register; however, because the Government owns all land, any religious organization that seeks facilities for worship other than private homes must seek government approval to build such facilities. There were no reports that the Government refused to approve the use or construction of facilities by any religious organization. Religious organizations, including religious NGO's, do not receive duty free privileges, although they sometimes are allowed to import items under the reduced duty structure used for corporations. The Government prohibits political activity by religious groups, and the Government's Directorate of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Local Government monitors religious compliance with this proscription against political activity.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Although there were past reports that the Government discouraged proselytizing by members of one faith among adherents of another, and by foreign religious groups and NGO's, the Government permitted such activity during the period covered by this report.

In a 1995 proclamation, the Government described specific guidelines on the role of religion and religiously affiliated NGO's in development and government, stating that development, politics, and public administration are the sole responsibility of the Government and citizens.

The 1995 Proclamation bans religious organizations from involvement in politics and restricts the right of religious media to comment on political matters. Pursuant to the 1995 proclamation, religious organizations are permitted to fund, but not initiate or implement, development projects; however, this proclamation was not enforced in practice—several religious organizations executed small-scale development projects without government interference. The proclamation also set out rules governing relations between religious organizations and foreign sponsors.

Muslims and Roman Catholics were required to pay a Rehabilitation Tax to recover properties that were expropriated by the previous regime; however, the tax was not enforced as rigorously against the Orthodox Church properties.

In April 1998, the authorities informed all religious organizations that all schools run by religious denominations providing general education would be incorporated into the public school system. At the time it was not made clear whether the clerical authorities would continue to administer the curriculum with government oversight or whether the school faculty would be absorbed into the Ministry of Education. However, no action was taken to implement this initiative because of the outbreak of the border conflict with Ethiopia. In 1998 the Government decreed that religiously affiliated organizations were prohibited from running kindergartens; however, this decree was not carried out. According to officials in the Religious Affairs Office, the Government allows religious schools to operate independently as long as they adhere to a standard curriculum.

There are no chaplains in the military; however, military personnel are free to worship at nearby houses of worship.

There were no reports that freedom of religion was restricted in areas under Ethiopian occupation during the period of the occupation.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Jehovah's Witnesses have several churches and members are not barred from meeting in private homes; however, the Government continued to harass, detain, and discriminate against members of the small community of Jehovah's Witnesses. In 1994 in accordance with a presidential decree, the Government revoked the trading licenses of some members of Jehovah's Witnesses and dismissed most of those who worked in the civil service. This governmental action resulted in economic, employment, and travel difficulties for many members of Jehovah's Witnesses, especially former civil servants and businessmen. In April 1997, the Government labor office issued a form to all employers in Asmara and the surrounding area requesting information on any government personnel who were members of Jehovah's Witnesses. In addition to these measures, members of Jehovah's Witnesses also often are denied identification cards, passports, exit visas, trading licenses, and government housing unless they hide their religion.

Most members of Jehovah's Witnesses have refused on religious grounds to participate in national service or to vote. This has led to widespread criticism that members of Jehovah's Witnesses collectively were shirking

In 1998 several members of Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested for failure to comply with national service laws and some were tried, although there is no information available regarding the verdicts or sentences in these cases. At the end of the period covered by this report, four members of Jehovah's Witnesses remained in detention without charge and without being tried for failing to participate in national service. These individuals have been detained for varying periods of time, some for more than 5 years, without charge. The maximum penalty for refusing to do national service is 3 years. Ministry of Justice officials have denied that any members of Jehovah's Witnesses were being held without charges, although they acknowledge that some members of Jehovah's Witnesses and a number of Muslims are in jail serving sentences for convictions on charges of evading national service. There is no indication that any persons are detained or imprisoned solely because of their religious beliefs or practices; however, the Government has singled out members of Jehovah's Witnesses for harsher treatment than that received by members of other faiths for similar actions.

Forced Religious Conversion

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses are the exception to widespread religious tolerance. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses generally are disliked and face some societal discrimination because of their refusal to participate in the independence referendum in 1993 and to perform national service, a refusal that is seen widely as unpatriotic. However, in the period covered by this report, there was a slight reduction in societal hostility towards Jehovah's Witnesses.

In 1999 leaders of the Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Muslim faiths created Good Deeds in Unity, an organization to help ethnic Eritrean expellees, Eritreans displaced by the war, and other needy persons in the country. This organization works with the government relief agency, the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Affairs Commission.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers have raised the case of Jehovah's Witnesses with government officials in the President's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the High Court, the Ministry of Justice, and in media interviews.

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