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KEY FINDINGS

The Eritrean government continues to repress religious freedom for unregistered—and in some cases registered—religious communities. Systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations include torture or other ill treatment of religious prisoners, arbitrary arrests and detentions without charges, a prolonged ban on public religious activities of unregistered religious groups, and interference in the internal affairs of registered religious groups. The situation is particularly grave for unregistered Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The

government dominates the internal affairs of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, the country’s largest Christian denomination, and suppresses the religious activities of Muslims, especially those opposed to the government-appointed head of the Muslim community. In light of these violations, USCIRF again finds in 2017 that Eritrea merits designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The State Department has designated Eritrea as a CPC since 2004, most recently in October 2016.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Continue to designate Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA, and maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations;
- Continue to use bilateral and multilateral 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 Antonios;
 - End religious persecution of unregistered religious communities and register such groups;
 - Grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah’s Witnesses;
 - Provide for conscientious objection by law in compliance with international human rights standards;
- Bring national laws and regulations, including registration requirements for religious communities, into compliance with international human rights standards;
- Bring the conditions and treatment of prisoners in line with international standards; and
- Extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross;
- Ensure that development assistance, if resumed, be directed to programs that contribute directly to democracy, religious freedom, human rights, and the rule of law;
- Support the renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea;
- Intensify efforts with the Ethiopian government, the UN, and other relevant partners 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 Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission that was established following the 1998–2000 war; and
- Encourage unofficial dialogue with Eritrean authorities on religious freedom issues by promoting a visit by U.S. and international religious leaders, and expand the use of educational and cultural exchanges.

BACKGROUND

There are no reliable statistics of religious affiliation in Eritrea. The Pew Research Center estimates that Christians comprise approximately 63 percent of the population and Muslims approximately 37 percent.

President Isaias Afwerki and the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) have ruled Eritrea since the country's independence from Ethiopia in 1993. President Afwerki and his inner circle maintain absolute authority. Thousands of Eritreans are imprisoned for their real or imagined opposition to the government, and the 2015 and 2016 [United Nations \(UN\) Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea \(COI-E\) reports](#) describe extensive use of torture and forced labor, including of religious prisoners of conscience. In 2016, the COI-E found "reasonable grounds to conclude" that crimes against humanity had been committed, and urged the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Eritrea to the International Criminal Court. In July, the UN Human Rights Council adopted the COI-E recommendation that the African Union establish an accountability mechanism to investigate, prosecute, and try individuals accused of committing crimes against humanity in Eritrea, including engaging in torture and overseeing Eritrea's indefinite military service, which the COI-E equated to slavery.

No private newspapers, political opposition parties, or independent nongovernmental organizations exist.

The government requires all physically and mentally capable people between the ages of 18 and 70 to perform a full-time, indefinite, and poorly paid national service obligation, which includes military, development, or civil service components. Eritrean authorities argue that the national service is necessary because the country remains on a war footing with Ethiopia, which has not implemented the demarcated border between the two countries. While national service does include a civil service component, all Eritreans are required to undertake military training; all forms of service are supervised by military commanders, and Eritreans cannot choose which type of service they must complete. Hence, there is no alternative for conscientious objectors. Further, a civilian militia program requirement for most males and females between the ages of 18 and 50 not in the military portion of national service also does not allow for or provide an alternative for conscientious

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objectors. The UN and various human rights groups have reported that persons who refuse to participate in national service are detained, sentenced to hard labor, abused, and have their legal documents confiscated. Religious practice

is prohibited in the military and conscripts are severely punished if found with religious materials or participating in religious gatherings.

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practice. The Eritrean constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief; guarantees the right to practice and manifest any religion; and prohibits religious discrimination. Nevertheless, the constitution has not been implemented since its ratification in 1997. In May 2014, President Afwerki announced a new constitution would be drafted, although no action had been taken by the end of the reporting period.

The lack of freedom of religion or belief, other fundamental human rights, and economic opportunities in Eritrea has led thousands of Eritreans to flee the country to neighboring states and beyond to seek asylum, including in Europe and the United States. The UN reported in 2015 that an estimated 6 percent of the population had fled Eritrea since 2014.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2016–2017

Registration

In 2002, the government imposed 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. All other religious communities are required to apply annually for registration with the Office of Religious Affairs. Registration requirements include a description of the group's history in Eritrea; detailed information about its foreign sources of funding, leadership, assets, and activities; and an explanation of how it would benefit the country or is unique compared to other religious communities. Registration also requires conformity with Proclamation No. 73/1995 "to Legally Standardize and Articulate Religious Institutions and Activities," which permits registered religious institutions the right to preach, teach, and engage in awareness campaigns but prohibits "infringing upon national safety, security and supreme national interests, instigating refusal to serve national service and stirring up acts of political or religious disturbances calculated to endanger the independence and territorial sovereignty of the country."

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To date, no other religious communities have been registered. The Baha'i community, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, and the Seventh-day Adventists submitted the required applications in 2002; however, the Eritrean government has yet to act on their applications. The government's inaction means that unregistered religious communities lack a legal basis on which to practice their faiths, including holding services or other religious ceremonies. According to the COI-E report and Eritrean refugees interviewed by USCIRF, most churches of nonregistered religious communities are closed and government approval is required to build houses of worship. Leaders and members of unregistered communities that continue to practice their faith are punished with imprisonment and fines.

Torture of Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Reports of torture and other abuses of religious prisoners continue. While the country's closed nature makes exact numbers difficult to determine, the State Department reports 1,200 to 3,000 persons are imprisoned on religious grounds in Eritrea. During the reporting period, there were reported incidents of new arrests. The vast majority of religious prisoners of conscience are members of unregistered churches arrested for participating in religious services or ceremonies.

Religious prisoners are sent routinely to the harshest prisons and receive some of the cruelest punishments. Released religious prisoners have reported that they were kept in solitary confinement or crowded conditions, such as in 20-foot metal shipping containers or underground

barracks, and subjected to extreme temperature fluctuations. In addition, there have been reports of deaths of religious prisoners due to harsh treatment or denial of medical care. Persons detained for religious activities, in both

short-term and long-term detentions, 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. Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's

Witnesses released from prison report being pressured to recant their faith, forced to sign statements that they would no longer gather to worship, and warned not to re-engage in religious activities.

Pentecostals and Evangelicals

Pentecostals and Evangelicals comprise the majority of religious prisoners. The Eritrean government is suspicious of newer religious communities, in particular Protestant Evangelical and Pentecostal communities. It has characterized these groups as being part of a foreign campaign to infiltrate the country, engage in aggressive evangelism alien to Eritrea's cultural traditions, and cause social divisions. Several Evangelical and Pentecostal pastors have been detained for more than 10 years, including Southwest Full Gospel Church Founder and Pastor Kiflu Gebremeskel (since 2004), Massawa Rhema Church Pastor Million Gebreselassie (since 2004), Full Gospel Church Pastor Haile Naigzhi (since 2004), Kale Hiwot Church Pastor Ogbamichael Teklehaimanot (since 2005), and Full Gospel Church Pastor Kidane Weldou (since 2005).

During 2016, security forces continued to arrest followers of these faiths for participating in clandestine prayer meetings and religious ceremonies, although toleration of these groups varied by location. The Eritrean government and Eritrean religious leaders do not publicize arrests and releases, and government secrecy and intimidation make documenting the exact numbers of such cases difficult. Nevertheless, USCIRF received confirmation of dozens more arrests in 2016. The State Department also has reported that some local authorities have denied water and gas services to Pentecostals.

Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses are persecuted for their political neutrality and conscientious objection to military service, which are aspects of their faith. On October 25, 1994,

President Afwerki issued a decree revoking Jehovah's Witnesses' citizenship for their refusal to take part in the referendum on independence or to participate in national service. Since 1994, Jehovah's Witnesses have been barred from obtaining government-issued identity and travel documents, government jobs, and business licenses. Eritrean identity cards are required for legal recognition of marriages or land purchases. The State Department has reported that some local authorities have denied water and gas services to Jehovah's Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses who have refused to serve in the military have been imprisoned without trial, some for over a decade, including Paulos Eyassu, Issac Mogos, and Negede Teklemariam, who have been detained in Sawa Prison since September 24, 1994. Moreover, the government's requirement that high school students complete their final year at the Sawa

Training and Education Camp, which includes six months of military training, effectively denies Jehovah's Witnesses an opportunity to attend their last year of high school and graduate because their faith prohibits them from participating in the military training. 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.

Whole congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses have been arrested while attending worship services in homes or in rented facilities, and individual Witnesses are arrested regularly and imprisoned for expressing their faith to others. Some are released quickly, while others are held indefinitely without charges. As of December 2016, the Eritrean government held in detention 54 Jehovah's Witnesses without charge. Of these, 10 are older than 60, four are older than 70, and one is in his 80s. The majority of detainees were arrested for participating in religious meetings or for conscientious objection.

The Eritrean government has appointed the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Mufti of the Eritrean Muslim community, as well as other lower-level religious officials. Hundreds of Orthodox Christian and Muslim religious leaders and laity who protested these appointments remain imprisoned.

Recognized Religious Communities

The Eritrean government also strictly controls the activities of the four recognized religious communities: the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea; Sunni Islam; the Roman Catholic Church; and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. These groups are required to submit activity reports every six months, instructed not to accept funds from coreligionists abroad (an order with which the Eritrean Orthodox Church reportedly said it would not comply), and have had religious leaders appointed by government officials. There also are reports of government surveillance of services of the four official religions. Eritrean officials visiting the United States reportedly pressured diaspora members to attend only Eritrean government-approved Orthodox churches in the United States. Muslims opposed to the government are labeled as fundamentalists. The Catholic Church is granted a few more—but still restricted—freedoms than other religious communities, including the permission to host some visiting clergy, to receive funding from the Holy See, to travel for religious purposes and training in small numbers, and to receive exemptions from national service for seminary students and nuns.

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U.S. POLICY

Relations between the United States and Eritrea remain poor. The U.S. government has long expressed concern about the Eritrean government's human rights practices

and support for Ethiopian, Somali, and South Sudanese rebel groups in the region. The government of Eritrea expelled the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2005, and U.S. programs in the country ended in fiscal year 2006. Eritrea receives no U.S. development, humanitarian, or security assistance. Since 2010, the Eritrean 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 violations when speaking about human rights conditions in Eritrea. The United States was a co-sponsor of a 2016 UN Human Rights Council resolution continuing for one year the position of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea.

U.S.-Eritrean relations also are heavily influenced, often adversely, by strong U.S. ties with Ethiopia. Gaining independence in 1993, Eritrea fought a costly border war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000. The United States, the UN, the European Union, and the now-defunct Organization of African Unity were formal witnesses to the 2000 accord ending that conflict. However, Eritrean-Ethiopian relations remain tense due to Ethiopia's refusal to permit demarcation of the boundary according to the Hague's Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission's 2002 decision. The U.S. government views the Commission's decision as "final and binding" and expects both parties to comply.

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U.S. policy toward Eritrea also is concentrated on U.S. concerns that the country's activities in the region could destabilize the Horn of Africa region. In 2009, the United States joined a 13-member majority to adopt [UN Security Council 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 2010, then President Barack Obama announced Executive Order 13536, blocking the property and property interests of several individuals for their financing of al-Shabaab in Somalia, including Eritrean presidential advisor Yemane Ghebreab. In 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 their dealings with Eritrea's mining industry do not support activities that would destabilize the region. In 2016, the U.S. government voted in the UN Security Council to retain an arms embargo on Eritrea and to renew for another year the mandate of its Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea.

In September 2004, the State Department first designated Eritrea as a CPC. When re-designating Eritrea 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 October 2016, 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 above).