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KEY FINDINGS

The Eritrean government continues to repress religious freedom. Thousands of Eritreans are detained because of their religious beliefs or practice. Systematic, ongoing, 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, forced conversions, and interference in the internal affairs of recognized religious groups. The government recognizes only 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. All others are unregistered and treated as illegal. The situation is particularly grave for unregistered Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian communities and Jehovah's Witnesses. Several Evangelical and Pentecostal pastors have been detained for more than 10 years. Over the past year, the Eritrean government increased its persecution of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians. Security forces arrested followers of these faiths for participating in clandestine prayer meetings and religious ceremonies. In addition, authorities conducted door-to-door searches and arrested individuals identified as Pentecostal or Evangelical solely for their religious

identity. Since 1994, Jehovah's Witnesses have been denied Eritrean citizenship and barred from obtaining government-issued identity and travel documents, government jobs, and business licenses. The government requires indefinite national service with no alternative for conscientious objectors, and Eritreans who refuse to participate 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. Three Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned without trial since 1994 for refusing military service. 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. Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios has been held under house arrest since 2007 for opposing government interference in internal church affairs. In light of these violations, USCIRF again finds in 2018 that Eritrea merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State has designated Eritrea as a CPC repeatedly since 2004, most recently in December 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA;
- Maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations;
- 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 (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets
- Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Seek a meeting for U.S. Embassy officials with Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Antonios;
- Support the renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea;
- Encourage the African Union to establish an accountability mechanism to investigate, prosecute, and try individuals accused of committing crimes against humanity in Eritrea, as recommended in 2016 by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea and the UN Human Rights Council; and
- Sponsor a UN General Assembly resolution denouncing Eritrea's gross religious freedom and human rights violations.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

State of Eritrea

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

POPULATION

5,918,919

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

48–50% Christian

48–50% Muslim

*U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

President Isaias Afwerki and the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) have ruled Eritrea with absolute authority since the country's independence from Ethiopia in 1993. No private newspapers, political opposition parties, or independent nongovernmental organizations exist. Thousands of Eritreans are imprisoned for their real or imagined opposition to the government, and the 2015 and 2016 reports of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COI-E) describe extensive use of torture and forced labor, including of religious prisoners of conscience.

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 provide an alternative for conscientious 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 for possessing religious materials or participating in religious gatherings.

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 2016, 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

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in torture and overseeing Eritrea's indefinite military service, which the COI-E equated to slavery.

There are very few legal protections for freedom of religion or belief in Eritrea. Those that do exist are either not implemented or are limited by other laws or in 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 that a new constitution would be drafted, although no action had been taken by the end of the reporting period.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 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."

To date, no other religious communities have been registered. The Baha'i community, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, and the Seventh-day Adventists all submitted the required applications in 2002; however, the Eritrean government has yet to

act on their applications. The government's inaction means unregistered religious communities lack a legal basis on which to practice their faiths, including holding public and private services or other religious ceremonies. Most nonregistered religious communities' houses of worship are closed and the government has not approved their building of new ones. Leaders and members of unregistered communities who 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. The vast majority of religious prisoners of conscience are members of unregistered churches. During 2017, there was an increase in the number of arrests.

Religious prisoners are routinely sent to the harshest prisons and receive some of the cruelest punishments. Released religious prisoners continue to report that they were kept in solitary confinement, crowded conditions, or underground barracks, and subjected to extreme temperature fluctuations. In addition, reports of deaths of religious prisoners due to harsh treatment or denial of

medical care continue.

Religious prisoners are not formally charged, permitted access to legal counsel, or accorded due process. 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 reengage in religious activities.

Pentecostals and Evangelicals

The Eritrean government is suspicious of newer religious communities, in particular Protestant Evangelical and Pentecostal communities. As a consequence, Pentecostals and Evangelicals comprise the

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vast majority of religious prisoners. The government characterizes these groups as being part of a foreign campaign to infiltrate the country, engaging in aggressive evangelism alien to Eritrea's cultural traditions, and causing social divisions.

In 2017, the Eritrean government increased its persecution of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians. Security forces arrested followers of these faiths for participating in clandestine prayer meetings and religious ceremonies. In a new development, police also undertook door-to-door searches and arrested

individuals identified as Pentecostal or Evangelical solely for their religious identity. In May, authorities arrested almost 100 Christians nationwide, including 49 Evangelicals at a secret

wedding in Asmara. In June, police arrested an additional 70 Pentecostals and Evangelicals in house-to-house searches. In August, authorities arrested 23 Christians in Asmara.

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 Gebreselasie (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).

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 country's independence referendum and 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 government food rations, 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.

Moreover, the government requires that high school students complete their final year at the Sawa Training and Education Camp, which includes six months of military training. This 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 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 rented facilities, and indi-

vidual Witnesses are arrested regularly and imprisoned for expressing their faith to others or for conscientious objection. Some are released quickly, while others are held indefinitely without charges. As of October 2017, the Eritrean government held in detention 55 Jehovah's Witnesses without charge.

Jehovah's Witnesses Paulos Eyassu, Issac Mogos, and Negede Teklemariam are Eritrea's longest-serving religious prisoners. They have been imprisoned in Sawa Prison without trial since September 24, 1994, for refusing military service.

Recognized Religious Communities

The Eritrean government also strictly controls the activities of the four recognized religious communities. 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 recognized 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

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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.

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.

The government-deposed Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios, who protested government interference in his church's affairs, has been held under house arrest since 2007. His case has been highlighted by

USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project.

In response to increased international pressure on the Eritrean government to release Patriarch Antonios, he was seen in public on July 16, 2017, for the first time in more than 10 years when government officials

escorted him to attend Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral in Asmara. However, Patriarch Antonios was surrounded by security officers and prevented from giving a sermon or speaking or praying with congregants. On July 19, the government moved Patriarch Antonios to a new location, reportedly with better living conditions, where he remains under house arrest.

U.S. POLICY

Relations between the United States and Eritrea remained poor in 2017. The government of Eritrea expelled USAID in 2005, and U.S. programs in the country ended in fiscal year 2006. 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 raise religious freedom violations when speaking about human rights conditions in Eritrea.

U.S. policy toward Eritrea is concentrated on security concerns. In response to the Eritrean government's

assistance to North Korea, on March 21, 2017, the U.S. government imposed a two-year sanction banning it and private exporters from doing business with the Eritrean Navy.

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 Eritrea-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 on 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. In 2011, the United States voted in favor of UN Security Council Resolution 2023, which calls on UN member states to imple-

ment Resolution 1907's sanctions and ensure their dealings with Eritrea's mining industry do not support activities that would destabilize the region. In 2017, 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.

U.S.-Eritrean relations also are adversely influenced by strong U.S.-Ethiopian ties. Gaining independence in 1993, Eritrea fought a costly border war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000. 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.

In September 2004, the State Department first designated Eritrea as a CPC. When redesignating Eritrea in September 2005 and January 2009, the State Department announced specific religious freedom sanctions

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by denying commercial export to Eritrea of defense articles and services covered by the Arms Export Control Act, with some items exempted. The State Department most recently redesignated Eritrea as a CPC in December 2017, 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).