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SOMALIA

OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom violations are prevalent in a number of countries in the Horn of Africa region. In Somalia, governmental and societal religious intolerance contributes to that country's poor religious freedom record. The U.S.-designated terrorist organization al-Shabaab is responsible for many of the abuses in Somalia.

BACKGROUND

Somalis are almost universally Sunni Muslims. Religious minorities, including Christians and Shi'a Muslims, constitute less than 1 percent of the country's population.

Somalia is a failed, highly federalized state where regional governments govern their respective areas. The country includes the capital, Mogadishu, the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, the autonomous area of Puntland, the Interim Galmudug Administration, the Interim Juba Administration, and the Interim South West Administration.

Al-Shabaab controls parts of central and southern Somalia. The central Somali government does not maintain effective control over the security forces and is supported by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

The transitional

Federal Government of Somalia held national assembly elections in October and November 2016, and presidential elections in February 2017. Former Prime Minister Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed was elected president.

Provisional Constitution

The Somali government continues to review the provisional constitution, which includes a number of provisions inconsistent with religious freedom. The constitution explicitly prohibits apostasy and names the Qur'an and the Sunna as the main sources of the law within the country. The provisional constitution stipulates that the judicial system would rely on Islamic, traditional, and customary law.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

USCIRF recommends that in its policies toward Somalia, the U.S. government should (1) declare al-Shabaab an entity of particular concern for religious freedom violations; and (2) include religious freedom promotion in countering violent extremism programs.

Societal and Governmental Intolerance toward Christians

Members of Somalia's extremely small and low-profile Christian expatriate and Christian convert Somali community are vulnerable to societal persecution.

Although conversion is currently legal in Somalia, it is not accepted socially. Proselytism is banned and also is socially unacceptable. The few Christians in Somalia worship secretly in house churches. Only one church exists in Somalia: St. Anthony Padua in Hargeisa, Somaliland's capital. Somali clerics and al-Shabaab

have stated that Christianity, Christians, and churches are antithetical to Somalia. Unlike previous reporting periods, there were no reports that al-Shabaab killed Christian converts.

The Somali central government also discriminates against Christians.

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Although the Somali Minister of Religious Affairs told USCIRF staff during a trip to Mogadishu in October that foreign Christians were acceptable, he dismissed the possibility that Somalis could be Christian. In previous reporting periods, the Ministry of Religious Affairs tried to ban Christmas celebrations in the country, calling them contrary to Islamic culture.

Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab (also known as the Harakat Shabaab al-Mujahidin, Shabaab, Mujahidin al-Shabaab Movement, Mujahideen Youth Movement, or Mujahidin Youth Movement) is a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization that pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda

in 2012. Its stated goals are to turn Somalia into an Islamic state; build a greater Somalia, including areas in neighboring countries with large ethnically Somali populations; and spread its strict version of Islam. Since 2007, al-Shabaab has fought both Somali and regional forces in its campaign to control Somalia, at times holding large territories in the central and southern regions of the country.

Clerics told USCIRF staff that al-Shabaab has attempted to assassinate them and continues to threaten them for their denunciation of the extremists' religious teachings.

Since 2015, al-Shabaab has experienced divisions over whether it should pledge its allegiance to al-Qaeda or to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Syria (ISIS). The larger al-Qaeda-linked al-Shabaab faction has assassinated or “arrested” individuals who have pledged allegiance to ISIS.

During the reporting period, the security situation in central and southern Somalia remained highly volatile. Al-Shabaab executed frequent attacks on AMISOM, the Somali National Army, and civilians in central and southern Somalia. It also perpetrated sporadic attacks in the Puntland autonomous region. In Mogadishu, al-Shabaab bombings killed Somali government officials, international representatives, and Somali civilians. The group assassinated federal government officials and their allies whom it viewed as non-Muslims or apostates. In addition, al-Shabaab continued to brutally enforce its extremist interpretation of Islamic law and moral codes. Clerics told USCIRF staff that al-Shabaab has attempted to assassinate them and continues to threaten them for their denunciation of the extremists' religious teachings.