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2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Eritrea

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
July 30, 2012

[Covers calendar year from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011]

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom; however, in practice the government did not implement these protections or respect religious freedom. The government demonstrated a trend toward deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. The government continued to harass and detain members of registered and unregistered religious groups, some of whom reportedly died as a result of torture and lack of medical treatment while in detention. The government retained significant control over the four registered religious groups. Many places of worship had to close because of government intimidation and the mass conscription of religious workers and parishioners.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. While citizens generally were tolerant of those practicing other religions, exceptions included negative societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostal groups, and conscientious objectors to military service based on religious beliefs.

The U.S. government attempted to discuss religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. However, government authorities responsible for religious affairs refused to discuss abuses of religious freedom with U.S. government officials. Religious groups in the country could not meet with U.S. government officials without putting their lives in jeopardy. All remaining nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including OXFAM, Norwegian Church Aid, Lutheran World Federation, VSO, and Refugee Trust International, were either forced out by the government or chose to leave.

The secretary of state redesignated Eritrea as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) on August 18 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In connection with this designation, the secretary of state ordered the continuation of the existing arms embargo.

Section I. Religious Demography

Although reliable statistics are not available, the government claims that 50 percent of the population is Christian and 50 percent Sunni Muslim. Reliable international sources estimate that the population is approximately 40 percent Christian and 60 percent Muslim. The Christian population is roughly 24 percent Orthodox Christian, 10 percent Roman Catholic, and 4 percent other groups (Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses). There is a small Baha'i community, and 2 percent of the population is animist. NGOs often estimate that there is a significant Muslim majority and larger populations of unregistered and unrecognized religious groups such as Pentecostals. The population is predominantly Muslim in the eastern and western lowlands and mainly Christian in the highlands. There are high levels of religious participation among all ethnic groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom, but the government has not implemented the constitution through additional legislation or in practice since its ratification in 1997.

The government has officially registered four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea, Sunni Islam, and the Roman Catholic Church. The government has not approved the applications for registration of the Meherte Yesus Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Faith

Mission Church, or the Baha'i Faith, despite their having met all registration requirements since 2002. All registrations require the president's signature for full approval.

Religious groups must obtain government approval to conduct religious services or activities. The Office of Religious Affairs reviews applications for religious groups seeking to be officially recognized. Application materials must include: a description of the history of the religious group in the country, an explanation of the uniqueness or benefit the group offers compared with other religious groups, names and personal information of the group's leaders, detailed information on assets, a description of the group's conformity to "local culture," and a declaration of all foreign sources of funding.

Religious organizations must obtain government approval to build facilities for worship and must observe strict rules governing relations between religious organizations and foreign donors and sponsors.

Religious groups must receive authorization from the Office of Religious Affairs to print and distribute documents. The Office of Religious Affairs routinely approves such requests, but only for officially recognized religious organizations.

The application for an exit visa requires a designation of religious affiliation, and Christians must also indicate their particular denomination. Members of registered religious groups can often obtain exit visas if they have completed national service requirements and are of retirement age.

The government bans religious organizations from involvement in politics and restricts the right of religious media to comment on political matters.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Eritrean Orthodox (Ge'ez) New Year, Islamic New Year, Epiphany, Moulid Al-Nebi (the birth of the Prophet Muhammad), Good Friday, Easter, Meskel, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including religious prisoners and detainees.

The government demonstrated a trend toward deterioration in respect for religious freedom. The government continued to harass and detain members of registered and unregistered religious groups and retained significant control over the four registered

religious groups. The government subjected religious prisoners to harsh conditions and held them for long periods of time without due process. There continued to be reports of forced renunciations of faith, torture, and deaths while in custody.

Government secrecy and intimidation of sources made it impossible to determine the precise number of religious prisoners at any one time, with both releases and arrests going unreported. Information from outside the capital was extremely limited. However, there were credible reports of more individuals being imprisoned than released.

At year's end, many estimated that the population of religious prisoners remained at 2,000 to 3,000, with a significant majority being Christian. This estimate did not include the approximately 3,000 religious workers that were compelled to national service against their will, nor the members of the Catholic Church who engaged in protests, all of whom reportedly were released. It was unknown how many of the approximately 100 individuals detained during the year were released on the condition of recanting their faith or paying a fine.

Two women and one man in their twenties, arrested in 2009 for participating in prayer meetings while serving in the national service, reportedly died in captivity at military camps. Misghina Gebretinsae, a 62-year-old Jehovah's Witness, arrested in 2008, died in July, reportedly after he was placed in solitary confinement in a metal shipping container for a week.

Released religious prisoners reported confinement in harsh conditions. Some prisoners were confined in crowded metal shipping containers holding up to 50 people and subject to extreme temperature fluctuations. Others experienced extended periods of solitary confinement. Religious prisoners reported being confined in underground, unventilated cement cells without sanitation facilities with up to 200 other prisoners. When prisoners passed out from the heat and stench of their cells, they were briefly taken outside to be revived and were then returned to the underground cell.

Some religious prisoners were hung from trees in painful positions for several weeks until they could no longer move their arms and legs, requiring other prisoners to feed and bathe them. Religious prisoners also reported being forced to walk barefoot on sharp rocks and thorns for one hour per day, beaten with hard plastic and metal rods in order to extract "confessions," and threatened with death if they did not recant their faith.

The government forced thousands of religious workers into indefinite military service. In previous years, the government often provided such workers an exemption. As a result of a naturally dwindling population, mass conscription of religious workers, and

government intimidation, many places of worship were forced to close throughout the country.

The government required students to attend the Sawa Military Training Camp (Sawa) during their final year of high school. Conscientious objector status was not recognized. Sawa was noted for its abuse of trainees, especially young women and individuals whose religious beliefs included maintaining conscientious objector status. These individuals were especially likely to quit high school and attempt to leave the country illegally to avoid obligatory military training, despite a shoot-to-kill order for those attempting such action.

Although members of several religious groups were imprisoned in past years for failure to participate in required national military service, the government singled out Jehovah's Witnesses to receive harsher treatment than that given to others. Jehovah's Witnesses and other conscientious objectors were normally willing to perform nonmilitary national service, which the government did not allow. In conducting searches for national military service evaders, security forces continued to target gatherings of unregistered religious groups more frequently than those of other organizations. At least three Jehovah's Witnesses have been detained for 15 years, reportedly for evading compulsory military service, a term far beyond the maximum legal penalty of two years. In addition, Jehovah's Witnesses who did not participate in national military service were subject to dismissal from the civil service; revocation of business licenses; eviction from government-owned housing; and denial of passports, identity cards, exit visas, and government services. They also were prohibited from having civil authorities legalize their marriages. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses' official website, at the end of the year, 51 of their members were in prison in the country because of their religious beliefs or conscience.

There continued to be reports that police forced some adherents of unregistered religious groups who were being held in detention to sign statements declaring that they had recanted their religious beliefs and had agreed to join an officially recognized religious group as a condition of their release. These individuals typically faced imprisonment and severe beatings until they agreed to sign such documents. Reports indicated these persons were also monitored afterward to ensure they did not practice or proselytize for their unregistered religion and attended a church or mosque associated with an officially recognized religious group. In some cases, authorities demanded letters from priests of the Orthodox Church confirming that the individuals attended that church. Similarly, police forced individuals who chose not to identify with a specific religious group, registered or otherwise, to choose a registered religious group or face continued detention.

In late December 2010, 65 people were arrested from the Philadelphia Church, an unrecognized Christian church in Asmara. Shortly thereafter, in early January, 27 more Christians were arrested from the nearby suburb of Kuchet. It is unknown how many of those arrested have been released, but anecdotal, unverified reports suggested most of those detained in Kuchet were released.

According to sources, in May and June the government rounded up approximately 3,000 religious workers belonging to government-approved Eritrean Orthodox, Evangelical (Lutheran), and Islamic communities and sent them to the Wi'a military camp for national service. It was further reported that lack of food and sanitary facilities at Wi'a caused illness among these religious workers within a few weeks of their arrival. U.S. government officials were unable to confirm if any of them had died, but unsanitary conditions and lack of medical treatment at Wi'a have historically led to many deaths. Although Wi'a is ostensibly a military camp, it was reported that the detention and torture of religious believers continued to take place there.

There were reports that authorities also detained at least 90 religious believers, including 26 college students, around Asmara in May and June. Of this group, only six are known to have been released.

On April 27, in the town of Segheneyti, police arrested 120 Catholic parishioners who were marching to the regional administrator's office to protest a government order stating that their priests had to report to Sawa Military School. Those detained were later released. After this incident, it was reported that members of the Catholic Church who went to local government offices for basic services, such as food rations, were told they were no longer citizens and had no right to any government services. It was not known how many, if any, religious workers in the Catholic Church were subsequently forced into military service.

The government continued to deny the applications of unregistered religious groups despite them having met all the registration requirements. The government subsequently arrested worshippers during their "illegal" religious gatherings.

Unregistered churches reported that the government asked for the names and addresses of all members under the threat of arrest for noncompliance. The government less frequently harassed and arrested members of churches that supplied identification information.

Recognized religious groups were often forbidden from managing their own operations and finances. The government appointed both the mufti (head) of the Islamic community in the country and the current patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, as

well as numerous other lower-level positions. The government maintained control over the operations of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. A government-appointed lay administrator managed church operations and controlled all church donations. All four recognized religious groups were also required to provide a list of members for possible enrollment in military and national service. Those who publicly protested such direct government management were branded as radicals or gay and were imprisoned indefinitely under harsh conditions, even if they were members of recognized religious groups. Unregistered religious groups also reported having their mail confiscated. In addition, they avoided local internet providers when sending or receiving information related to their religion for fear of being monitored.

The government did not appoint the president of the Lutheran Church, but reliable sources indicated extensive government coordination. The Pope appointed the highest-ranking Catholic Church official; however, the government put pressure on the church to conform its activities to government policies.

Former Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios remained under house arrest and went on a hunger strike in July to protest his continued detention. He was reportedly in grave health as a result.

Religious facilities that did not belong to the four officially recognized religious groups were forced to close following a 2002 government decree that all religious groups must register or cease all religious activities. As a result, there were many large abandoned churches in Asmara. Some local authorities quietly tolerated unregistered groups who worshipped in homes or rented spaces, but some others did not allow such groups to meet. The government continued to disrupt home-based worship and arrested those who hosted prayer meetings.

Military personnel were sometimes allowed to possess certain religious books and pray privately. This practice continued to be applied inconsistently. There were reports from Christian members of the military that Bibles were confiscated and sometimes burned. Carrying a Bible while serving in the military has also been used as grounds for arrest.

In order to obtain exit visas, members of unregistered religious groups were required to obtain additional permission from the Office of Religious Affairs. The Office of Religious Affairs typically denied exit visas to anyone known to be a member of an unregistered religious group. There were also reports of seemingly arbitrary actions toward members of unregistered religious groups, including immediate arrest. Such actions might be linked to corruption within the office of immigration.

In December the United Nations imposed additional sanctions on the country under Resolution 2023. Following the imposition of sanctions, the government-controlled media branded the United Nations and Western governments as imperialist entities. This rhetoric contributed to the continued harassment of unrecognized religious groups, many of which the government has characterized as under the control of Western governments.

During the year, the government forced all international NGOs to close, further limiting the ability of the international community to monitor religious persecution in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Citizens generally accepted religious pluralism. Christians and Muslims in Asmara often celebrated their holidays jointly.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals faced societal discrimination; members of the general public often reported them and their activities to security officials. Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals were unable to receive local community-based services, and much of the public accepted government statements that branded them as disloyal and subversive.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government attempted to discuss religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. However, government authorities responsible for religious affairs refused to discuss abuses of religious freedom with U.S. government officials. International NGOs largely had left or been forced out of the country by the government, and religious leaders maintained a low-profile in order to attempt to avoid government repercussions, including arrest and death.

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