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U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Eritrea**International Religious Freedom Report 2004**

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution, which the Government has not yet implemented, provides for freedom of religion; however, in practice the Government severely restricted this right for all but the four government-sanctioned religions—Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Catholics, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation), which together represent the vast majority of the population. Oftentimes, treatment of religious minorities varied depending on local authorities.

The Government's poor respect for religious freedom for minority religious groups continued to decline during the period covered by this report. The Government harassed, arrested, and detained members of Pentecostal and other independent evangelical groups reform movements from and within the Eritrean Orthodox Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses. There were also numerous reports of physical torture and attempts at forced recantations. Following a May 2002 government decree that all religious groups must register or cease all religious activities, the Government closed all religious facilities not belonging to the four sanctioned religions. These closures, the Government's refusal to authorize any registrations, and the restriction on holding religious meetings continued through the period covered by this report.

Citizens generally are tolerant of one another in the practice of their religion; however, societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal groups are an exception to this general tolerance. There also were reports that some individuals encouraged harassment of these nonsanctioned religious groups and reported their activities to the Government.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In September 2004, the Secretary of State designated Eritrea as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 48,489 square miles, and its population is approximately 3.6 million. Although reliable statistics are not available, approximately 50 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, and approximately 40 percent is 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 fewer than 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses. Approximately 2 percent practice traditional indigenous religions. Also present in very small numbers are practicing Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is. The population in the eastern and western lowlands predominantly is Muslim and in the highlands predominantly is Christian. There are very few atheists. Religious participation is high among all ethnic groups.

Within the country's geographic and ethnic groups, the majority of the Tigrinya are Orthodox Christian, with the exception of the Djiberti Tigrinya, who are Muslim. The majority of members of the Tigre, Saho, Nara, Afar, Rashaida, Beja, and Blen ethnic groups are Muslim. Approximately 40 percent of the Blen are Christian, the majority being Catholic. More than half of the Kunama are Roman Catholic, with a large minority of Muslims and some who practice 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 some Muslim Djiberti Tigrinya and Saho. The Afar and Rashaida, as well as some of the Saho and Tigre, 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.

Foreign missionaries operate in the country, including representatives of the Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim faiths. Some missionaries and representatives of the restricted nonsanctioned religious groups work in the country but keep a low profile for fear of abuse of their congregations. There also are several international faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that provide humanitarian aid, including Mercy Corps, Caritas, Dutch Interchurch Aid, Norwegian Church Aid, Lutheran World Federation, Catholic Relief Services, and the Islamic Mufti's Relief Organization.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Government drafted and approved a Constitution in 1997 that provides the freedom to practice any religion; however, the Government has not yet implemented its provisions. The Government severely restricted this right in the case of numerous small Protestant churches and Jehovah's Witnesses.

In May 2002, the Minister of Information issued a decree that all religious groups must be registered. Leaders of the nonsanctioned religious groups were warned that, until the registration applications were received and approved, no religious activities or services could be held. Registration requirements include a description of the history of the religious group in the country, explanation of the "uniqueness" or benefit that the group offers compared to other religious groups already in the country, names and personal information of religious leaders, a list of group members, detailed information on assets and property owned by the group, and sources of funding from outside the country. A government committee reviews the applications, which in theory are to be approved only if they conform to local culture.

The Government approved no registrations during the period covered by this report, despite the fact that several religious groups submitted their registration documents over 2 years ago and continued to inquire with the relevant government offices. Informal comments from senior government officials suggest that no registrations will be approved in the foreseeable future.

The four government-sanctioned religious groups – Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Catholics, and members of the Evangelical Church of Eritrea – were not required to register, and their services and activities were allowed to continue. They have been requested to provide to the Government an accounting of their financial sources, as well as lists of personnel and real property.

In 1994, a presidential decree was issued declaring that because Jehovah's Witnesses had "forsaken their nationality" by refusing to vote in the 1993 independence referendum and by avoiding national service duty, the Government would dismiss Jehovah's Witnesses from government employment, revoke their right to hold business licenses, and refuse issuance of identity or travel documents. This government action resulted in economic, employment, and travel difficulties for many members of Jehovah's Witnesses, especially former civil servants and merchants.

Any religious organization that seeks facilities for worship other than private homes must obtain government approval to build such facilities.

Religious organizations, including faith-based NGOs, do not receive duty-free privileges, although they sometimes are allowed to import items under the reduced duty structure used for companies.

The following religious holidays are recognized as official holidays by the Government: Christmas (both Orthodox and non-Orthodox), Epiphany (Christian), Eid al-Fitr (Muslim), Good Friday (Christian), Easter (Christian), Eid al-Adha (Muslim), Eid al-Mewlid (Muslim), New Year (Orthodox), Meskel (Orthodox).

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Islam and Orthodox Christianity are practiced widely and largely are tolerated throughout the country, with persons free to worship at the religious service of their choice. There is a centuries-old history of tolerance and peaceful coexistence between Christianity and Islam in the country. Following the May 2002 government decree that certain religious groups must register or cease all religious activities, religious facilities not belonging to the four sanctioned religious groups were forced to close. Authorities also informed nonsanctioned religious groups that a standing law would be used to stop political or other gatherings in private homes of more than three or five persons. In practice, authorities enforced this law sporadically during the period covered by this report. Treatment of religious minorities often varied depending on local authorities. For example, some local authorities allow banned groups to worship quietly whereas others do not allow banned groups to meet at all.

The Government closely monitors the activities and movements of nonsanctioned religious groups and individual members, including nonreligious social functions attended by members. The Government also harassed and monitored some Orthodox congregations whose religious services it did not approve.

The Government denied visa applications for representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups abroad who applied to travel to the country to meet with their congregations or discuss religious freedom issues with government officials.

A 1995 proclamation bans religious organizations from involvement in politics and restricts the right of religious media from commenting on political matters. The Directorate of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Local Government monitors religious compliance with this proscription.

Faith-based 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.

The military has no chaplains. Military personnel are free to worship at nearby houses of worship for the four sanctioned religions. Military members reportedly are sometimes allowed to possess approved religious books to pray privately in their barracks but not in groups. Several members of nonsanctioned religious groups reportedly were arrested for violating this rule.

The Government also restricts what it deems to be radical forms of Islam. Most foreign preachers of Islam are not allowed to proselytize, and funding of Islamic missionary or religious activities is controlled.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were numerous credible reports that over 400 members of nonsanctioned religious groups have been detained or imprisoned. Government restrictions make it difficult to determine the precise number of current religious prisoners, but it is likely over 200. These reports came from individual religious leaders, members of sanctioned and nonsanctioned religious groups, and family members of detainees.

In March, 20 members of the Kalehiwot Church were arrested while praying in a private home in Assab. Also in March, the pastor of the Medhane Alem, a component of the Orthodox Church, was arrested and released the following day. Officials report that the group is currently "under investigation."

In February, 12 members of the Full Gospel Church in Asmara reportedly were arrested while praying in a private home. They were released after approximately 1 month. Of the 12, 1 was under the age of 18 and another was handicapped—both of these detainees were released after. Also in February, 50 members of the Hallelujah Church in Asmara were arrested.

In November 2003, the pastor and seven other members of the Kale Hiwot Church in Asmara were arrested and detained. That same month, 10 young Pentecostal women were

arrested and detained at the Sawa military camp.

In August 2003, over 60 teenage Protestants engaged in compulsory military training at the Sawa military camp were detained and reportedly subjected to severe abuse because they had been caught in possession of Bibles. Authorities reportedly imprisoned the youths in metal shipping containers.

In February 2002, 74 military and national service personnel were arrested and remained imprisoned near Assab during the period covered by this report. Reports suggest they are being detained until they repudiate their faith. Some of the detainees reportedly have been rolled around in oil drums, abused by fellow prisoners, and the women sexually abused; some of the detainees reportedly suffer from partial paralysis and other physical injuries as a result of their torture. Other reports describe other individuals and groups in the military and national service who have been detained, harassed, and physically tortured for practicing nonsanctioned religions.

There were several reports that on occasion police tortured those detained for their religious beliefs, including using bondage, heat exposure, and beatings. There also were credible reports that some of the detainees were required to sign statements repudiating their faith or agreeing not to practice it as a condition for release. In some cases where detainees refused to sign, relatives were asked to do so on their behalf.

Government officials agreed at the end of the period covered by this report to discuss informally details of certain reported abuse cases. Senior Ministry of Justice officials said that it was against government policy to arrest anyone solely because of religious affiliation. According to Ministry officials, cases of such arrests are investigated and some detainees have been released, but security officials are not punished for making wrongful arrests.

The Justice Ministry's attention reportedly resulted in the April release of approximately 14 members of the Rhema Church who had been arrested in February while praying in a private home in Asmara. The arrestees, including four adolescents, were reportedly beaten by security officials with ropes and locked in metal shipping containers at a prison facility outside the capital.

Members of other churches also reportedly were arrested without charges because of religious affiliation. In January, approximately 40 Jehovah's Witnesses reportedly were arrested while praying in a private home in Asmara. Approximately 20 members remained in detention, many reportedly in a metal shipping container at a prison outside Asmara. One of the members held in a shipping container is reportedly over 90 years old.

The Government does not excuse individuals who object to national service for religious reasons or reasons of conscience, nor does the Government allow alternative service. Most members of Jehovah's Witnesses have refused to participate in national service or to vote based upon religious beliefs, which has led to widespread criticism that they collectively were shirking their civic duty. Some Muslims also have objected to universal national service because of the requirement that women perform military duty.

Although members of other religious groups, including Muslims, reportedly have been punished in past years for failure to participate in national service, the Government has singled out Jehovah's Witnesses for harsher treatment than that received by followers of other faiths for similar actions. Jehovah's Witnesses who did not participate in national service have been subject to dismissal from the civil service, revocation of their business licenses, eviction from government-owned housing, and denial of passports, identity cards, and exit visas.

At the end of the period covered by this report, nine 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, some for more than 9 years. The maximum official penalty for refusing to perform national service is 3 years. Ministry of Justice officials have denied that any Jehovah's Witnesses were in detention without charge, although they acknowledge that some Jehovah's Witnesses and a number of Muslims were jailed for evading national service. There were no reports that Jehovah's Witnesses who performed national service and participated in the national independence referendum were subject to discrimination.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were reports that police forced some adherents of nonsanctioned religious groups to sign statements that they would abandon their faith and return to the Orthodox Church.

There were no reports of forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Citizens generally are tolerant of one another in the practice of their religion, particularly among the four government-sanctioned religious groups. Mosques and the principal Christian churches coexist throughout the country, although Islam tends to predominate in the lowlands and Christianity in the highlands. In Asmara, Christian and Muslim holidays are respected by all religions. Some holidays are celebrated jointly.

Societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses and some Pentecostal groups are an exception to this general religious tolerance. Jehovah's Witnesses generally are disliked and face some societal discrimination because of their refusal to participate in the 1993 independence referendum and to perform national service, a refusal that is widely judged as unpatriotic. There was some social prejudice against members of the nonsanctioned religious groups. Some individuals reportedly cooperated with government authorities by reporting on and harassing those members.

Leaders of the four principal religions meet routinely and engage in efforts to foster cooperation and understanding among those religions. Of these religions, only the Catholic Church has publicly and vigorously defended the right of freedom of conscience for all faiths. Leaders of the four principal religious organizations enjoy excellent interfaith relations.

In April, the head of the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students, a quasi-governmental organization, reportedly told representatives of the four sanctioned religions that they needed to "bring back the youth" who had strayed into the nonsanctioned religions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy meets regularly with leaders of the religious community but has been unsuccessful at arranging meetings with the Government's Director of Religious Affairs.

The U.S. Ambassador and other Embassy officers have raised the cases of detentions and restrictions on nonsanctioned religious groups with government officials in the President's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, and the leaders of the sole legal political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice.

Two senior staff from the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom traveled to the country and met with senior government officials to discuss religious prisoners, religious freedom, and freedom of conscience. There were also meetings with members of religious organizations.

In September 2004, the Secretary of State designated Eritrea as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

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