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ERITREA 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The law and unimplemented constitution prohibit religiously motivated discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as the freedom to practice any religion. The government recognizes four officially registered religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea.

During the year, the government again arrested individuals based on religion. The Christian nongovernmental organization (NGO) Release International reported the arrest of 177 members of unregistered Christian groups between January and April as they gathered in private homes to worship or record worship music. The NGO said the detainees were held in Mai Serwa Prison. Pastor Tesfay Seyoum, founder and leader of Meserete Kristos Church, died of a brain hemorrhage during the year while he was detained in Mai Serwa. In July, the Christian NGO Voice of the Martyrs Canada reported that two pastors remained in detention without charges since 2004. There was no information on the conditions under which these detainees were being held, or on the charges against them, if any. NGOs said that in the past, authorities kept some Christian detainees in shipping containers and beat and tortured them to try to force them to renounce their faith.

The government released 22 Christian detainees between March and July, including some who had been in prison for more than nine years, according

to international NGOs. The government provided no information about the charges against the detainees or why they were released. The government also released 300 Muslims from prison in July. These were mostly students who were arrested after protesting government efforts to regulate their school in 2017. Release International estimated that even factoring the number of prisoners freed during the year, there were more than 500 Christians in detention at year's end. Other NGOs said as many as 1,000 were detained, including 32 Jehovah's Witnesses, for refusing to participate in military service or renounce their faith.

Unregistered religious groups lacked the privileges of registered groups and their members risked arrest and mistreatment, with renunciation of their faith as a condition of their release. The government allowed some unregistered groups to operate and tolerated their worship activities. International NGOs and international media continued to report that members of all religious groups were, to varying degrees, subjected to government abuses and restrictions. The government continued to deny citizenship to Jehovah's Witnesses after stripping them of citizenship in 1994 for refusing to participate in the referendum that created the independent state of Eritrea.

The government's lack of transparency and intimidation of civil society and religious communities continued to make it difficult to obtain information on the status of societal respect for religious freedom. International observers, however, continued to state that religious tolerance appeared to be widespread between different groups within society. Churches and mosques were near each other, and most citizens congratulated members of other religious groups on religious holidays and other events. There were no reports of sectarian violence, and most towns and ethnic groups included members from all the major religious groups.

U.S. officials in Asmara and Washington raised religious freedom concerns with government officials throughout the year, including the detention of members of unregistered religious groups and the lack of alternative service for conscientious objectors. U.S. embassy officials further discussed religious freedom on a regular basis with a wide range of individuals, including members of most religious groups, including unregistered ones; members of the diplomatic corps based in Asmara; and UN officials. Embassy officials used social media and outreach programs to engage the public and highlight the commitment of the United States to religious freedom.

Since 2004, Eritrea has been designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing restrictions referenced in 22 CFR 126.1 pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.3 million (mid-year 2023). Other sources, citing UN figures, estimate a population of approximately 3.8 million. Reliable population data on the country is difficult to gather. There are no reliable figures on religious affiliation. The World Religion Database estimated the population to be 52 percent Muslim and 47 percent Christian in 2020. The Muslim population is predominantly Sunni. The Christian population is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox. Catholics, Protestants, and other Christian denominations, including

Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals, plus Baha'is and traditional animists, together constitute less than 5 percent of the population. Only one Jew is known to remain in the country and resides in the country on a part-time basis.

A majority of the population in the southern and central regions is Christian, while the northern areas are majority Sunni Muslim. A majority of the Tigrinya, the largest ethnic group, is Christian. Seven of the other eight principal ethnic groups, the Tigre, Saho, Afar, Bilen, Hedareb, Nara, and the Rashaida, are predominantly Sunni Muslim and reside mainly in the northern regions of the country. The Kunama are diverse, with Christians, Muslims, and animists.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The law and unimplemented constitution prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the freedom to practice any religion.

Proclamation 73/1995, which serves as the guiding law on religious issues, calls for separation of religion and state; outlines the parameters to which religious organizations must adhere, including concerning foreign relations and social activities; establishes an Office of Religious Affairs; and requires religious groups to register with the government or cease activities. Some members of religious groups that are unregistered or otherwise not in compliance with the law reportedly continue to be subject to the former provisional penal code, which sets penalties for failure to register and

noncompliance. A revised penal code, pending implementation since 2015, does not directly address penalties for religious groups that fail to register or otherwise comply with the law, but includes a punishment of between one- and six- months' imprisonment and a fine of 5,001 to 20,000 nakfa (\$330 to \$1,300) for "unlawful assembly."

The Office of Religious Affairs has authority to regulate religious activities and institutions, including approval of the applications of religious groups seeking official registration. Each application must include a description of the group's history in the country; an explanation of the uniqueness or benefit the group offers compared with other registered 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.

The Office of Religious Affairs has registered four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation). While the Baha'i Faith is not one of the four officially recognized religious groups, the group has applied to register every year since its establishment in the country in 1959 and has "de facto" recognition from the government. A decree requires all other religious groups to submit registration applications and to cease religious activities and services prior to approval.

Religious groups must obtain government approval to build facilities for worship.

While the law does not specifically address religious education in public schools, Proclamation 73/1995 outlines other permitted activities by

religious organizations, such as undertaking “spiritual teachings and preaching” and assisting the poor and needy. The proclamation does not include education in general as an approved activity; therefore religious groups are barred from operating private schools.

By law, all citizens between 18 and 50 must perform 18 months of national service, with limited exceptions, including for health reasons such as physical disability or pregnancy. In times of emergency, the government may extend the length of national service indefinitely, and the country officially has been in a state of emergency since the beginning of the 1998 war with Ethiopia. There is also a compulsory militia for all men not in the military, including many who had been demobilized or exempted in the past from national service. The government may detain those who fail to participate in the militia or national service. Militia service primarily involves marching, listening to patriotic lectures, guarding government buildings, and helping with farm projects such as harvesting crops or building dams. The law does not provide for conscientious objector status for religious reasons, nor are there alternative activities for persons willing to perform national service but unwilling to engage in military or militia activities.

The law prohibits any involvement in politics by religious groups.

The government requires all citizens to obtain an exit visa prior to departing the country. The application requests the applicant’s religious affiliation, but the law does not require that information.

The law limits foreign financing for religious groups, including registered groups. The only contributions legally allowed are from local followers, the government, or government-approved foreign sources.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

During the year, the government again arrested individuals based on religion. The NGO Release International reported that authorities arrested 39 Christian women and five men while they gathered in two private homes for the New Year. The government held the 44 individuals at Mai Serwa Prison on the outskirts of the capital, Asmara. In March, according to the NGO, police arrested 30 Christians who had gathered to worship in a home in the town of Keren. In April, Release International reported that police arrested 103 Christian college students in Asmara when police raided a group who had gathered to sing and record video clips for social media. Authorities then took the students to Mai Serwa Prison, according to the NGO.

On July 27, the Christian NGO Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Canada reported that two evangelical Protestant church leaders, Pastor Haile Naizgi and Gebremeskel Kiflu, remained in prison for more than 19 years without charge. The NGO said that Naizgi, then head of the Full Gospel Church of Eritrea, a network of house churches, and Kiflu, then chair of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance, were both arrested in May 2004. There was no information on the specific conditions under which any of these detainees were being held, or on the charges against them, if any, but Mai Serwa Prison remained heavily overcrowded, with limited access to food and medical services, according to human rights groups.

In its most recent *World Watch List* report, Christian NGO Open Doors stated that Christians in the country who were not members of the four recognized religious groups were “at constant risk.” The NGO said “Even in the recognized churches, the government closely monitors every congregation. Speaking out about persecution or government interference in church matters is not tolerated at all.”

The government released some detained Christians during the year. In September, VOM Canada said that “about half” of the 103 college students arrested in Asmara in April had been released, but the NGO had no additional information about them. VOM Canada and Release International said 13 other persons were released from prison in late July. The seven women and six men had been imprisoned for 10 years for being members of the unregistered Pentecostal faith. The government did not provide any information about the charges against these Pentecostal detainees or why they were released. Release International reported that nine Christian prisoners were released in March, four from Mai Serwa Prison. Most of these had served sentences of more than nine years. Five other prisoners were released from the town of Assab in March, on the coast near the border with Djibouti, according to the NGO, but no further information was available concerning them.

Estimates vary as to the overall number of Christian prisoners of faith in the country. Release International estimated there were more than 500 Christians in detention during the year; most because they were not members of the government-recognized Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, or Orthodox groups. Other NGOs said as many as 1,000 were detained. Determining more precisely the number of persons imprisoned for their religious beliefs was difficult due to lack of government transparency and what multiple sources stated was intimidation of those who might come

forward with such information. Most Christian prisoners were believed to be Pentecostal or evangelical Christians. Many had been detained for more than a decade, often without charge, at locations kept secret from their families. Authorities refused to release records on the detentions. According to Release International and other NGOs, authorities kept some Christian prisoners in shipping containers, exposed to searing heat by day and freezing cold by night. NGOs stated that officials beat and tortured some to try to force them to renounce their faith; some were reportedly tied up and hung from trees. NGOs said prison authorities banned praying aloud, singing, preaching, or reading of religious books.

Christian media reported in April that evangelical pastor Tesfay Seyoum, founder and leader of Meserete Kristos Church, died of a brain hemorrhage that occurred during his detention in Mai Serwa Prison. He had been detained there for 10 years. Officials and members of the local community denied permission for him to be buried in a cemetery near his home area because of his evangelical Christian faith. After two weeks, he was buried in another cemetery north of Asmara.

On July 22, 300 Muslims were released from prison. The prisoners were Sunni students of Diya'e Islamic School who police arrested after they staged a protest against government efforts to regulate the school in 2017. In November, 16 prisoners, mainly members of the school board of directors, completed their sentences and were released.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses Religious Freedom Report for Eritrea released in December, authorities continued to detain 36 Jehovah's Witnesses, 26 men and 10 women. Five of those were arrested in 2023. One of the prisoners was 81-year-old Tesfazion Gebremichael. In 2022, Jehovah's Witnesses expressed concerns about Gebremichael's health and

called for his release, but no information was available concerning his condition in 2023. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that as of December, four of its members, aged 62 to 77, had died in government custody since 2011. The government continued to single out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment because of their blanket refusal to vote in the 1993 referendum on the country's independence and subsequent refusal to participate in mandatory national service, for which the government stripped them of their citizenship in 1994. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that the government continued to detain their members and other religious prisoners for failure to follow the law or for alleged national security reasons and continued to deny them citizenship.

Authorities' treatment of persons imprisoned because of religion continued to appear inconsistent. In some prisons, religious prisoners continued to report they were not allowed to have visitors, but in other prisons, visitors were allowed. Some former prisoners held for their religious beliefs continued to report harsh detention conditions, including solitary confinement, physical abuse, and inadequate food, water, and shelter. Other former religious prisoners reported acceptable conditions, adequate food, and no physical abuse. Some persons imprisoned because of religion reported they were allowed to worship together in prison as long as they did so quietly.

Information continued to be extremely limited about those imprisoned for their faith. Many arrests and releases were unreported. The government continued to detain without due process persons associated with unregistered religious groups, occasionally for long periods, and sometimes on the grounds of threatening national security, according to minority religious group members and international NGOs. Their eventual release from detention was sometimes conditioned on a formal renunciation of

their faith. In August, an executive from VOM Canada said minority religious group members “simply disappeared” into the country’s prison system. He said Christians from unregistered groups, especially, were often depicted by the government as “not patriotic and not good citizens.” Another international NGO official said in January that unregistered Christians who continued to worship were treated as “enemies of the state” by the government. In March, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Nada al-Nashif said that the “harassment and arbitrary detention of people because of their faith continued unabated” in the country, with “hundreds of religious leaders and followers affected.”

Government authorization remained necessary for any organization to print and distribute documents; for religious groups, that authorization needed to come from the Office of Religious Affairs, which continued to approve requests only from the four officially registered religious groups.

Government restrictions on registered and unregistered religious groups remained in place regarding proselytizing, accepting external funding from international NGOs and international organizations, and groups selecting their own religious leaders. Unregistered religious groups also faced restrictions in gathering for worship, constructing places of worship, and teaching their religious beliefs to others, although they reported that in many cases the government unofficially allowed them to worship in private homes as long as it was done discreetly.

Official attitudes differed toward members of unregistered religious groups worshipping in homes or rented facilities. According to VOM Canada, the government actively sought to infiltrate unregistered churches and imprison their leaders. Some local authorities reportedly tolerated the presence and

activities of unregistered groups, while others attempted to prevent them from meeting.

The government, which has not approved the registration of additional religious groups since 2002, again approved no new religious groups during the year. Unrecognized religious groups expressed fear that applying would open them to further repression.

Jehovah's Witnesses remained largely unable to obtain official identification documents, which left many of them unable to study in government institutions and barred them from most forms of employment, government benefits, access to bank accounts, and travel. Local authorities sometimes denied government ration coupons to Jehovah's Witnesses and members of Pentecostal groups because members of those unregistered groups were not issued government ID cards.

The issuance of exit visas remained inconsistent and did not adhere to any policy, as reported by the European Asylum Support Office in 2019 (most recent data available). Members of unrecognized religious communities could be denied exit visas merely on the basis of their religious affiliation. All citizens, including members of any religious group, were ineligible for exit visas until they completed their national service.

The government approved travel by some Muslims for the Hajj during the year, but no statistics were available concerning that travel.

The government continued to ban all non-Sunni practices of Islam.

Diaspora groups reported authorities controlled directly or indirectly virtually all activities of the four formally recognized groups. Local observers

continued to say members of the officially registered four religious groups generally did not face impediments to religious practice. Individuals also reported restrictions on clergy meeting with foreign diplomats.

The government continued to run formerly Catholic-, Orthodox-, and Muslim-owned schools that were confiscated under Proclamation 73/1995's ban on religious institutions providing social services including education. In some of those schools, the government left the previous school structure and staff largely intact, with the exception of religious schools that had clergy as staff; in such schools, replacement staff were provided by the Ministry of Education. In addition, any school located on the premises of a religious institution remained completely shut down and was not converted for public use. The government allowed the one private school reopened in 2022 to continue to operate in 2023, but enrollment was limited to international, non-Eritrean students only.

Most places of worship unaffiliated with the four officially registered religious groups remained closed to worship, but many of those buildings remained physically intact and undamaged. The government continued to permit the last Jew known to remain in the country to maintain the synagogue in Asmara as a historic site. The Greek Orthodox church remained open as a cultural building, and members of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church sometimes held religious services at the site. Other structures belonging to unregistered groups, such as the Church of Christ, remained shuttered. The government allowed the Baha'i center in Asmara to remain open, and members of the center had unrestricted access to the building. A Baha'i temple outside of Asmara was allowed to operate. There were indications other unregistered groups, including Seventh-day Adventists, operated to some degree. The Anglican church building held

services, but only under the auspices of the registered Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Some church leaders continued to state the government's restriction on foreign financing reduced church income and religious participation by preventing churches from training clergy or building or maintaining facilities.

Government control of all mass media, as well as a fear of imprisonment or other government actions, continued to restrict the ability of unregistered religious group members to bring attention to government actions against them, according to observers. Restrictions on public assembly and freedom of expression severely limited the ability of unregistered religious groups to assemble and conduct worship in a designated place of worship, according to group members.

Although no such officials were appointed during the year, observers continued to state the government exerted significant direct and indirect influence over the appointment of heads of recognized religious communities, including the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Sunni Islamic community; some international NGOs said authorities directly controlled the appointments. The government denied this, stating appointment decisions were made entirely by religious communities.

While the majority of high-level officials, both military and civilian, were Christian, four ministers in the 17-member cabinet and at least one senior military leader, were Muslim.

The government continued to say its official party doctrine promoted national citizenship above religious sectarianism and that it did not officially prefer any religion. As evidence of its doctrine, the national service program

continued to require all 12th graders from across the country to attend Warsay Yikealo Secondary School at the Sawa military camp (colocated with a defense training center), where they studied and received military training.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Continued government control of all media and public discourse limited information available concerning societal actions affecting religious freedom. International observers continued to note, however, that religious tolerance in general appeared to be widespread within society. Many churches and mosques remained close to each other, and most citizens reportedly congratulated members of other religious groups on the occasion of religious holidays and other events. There were no reports of sectarian violence, and most towns and ethnic groups included members from all major religious groups. In its World Watch List, however, Open Doors said, “anyone who converts from Islam or leaves the Eritrean Orthodox Church to be part of an evangelical or Pentecostal church is likely to come under intense pressure from their family and community.”

Some Christian leaders continued to report Muslim leaders and communities were willing to collaborate on community projects. Formal ecumenical and interreligious committees did not exist, although local leaders met informally. Some shrines were venerated by both Orthodox and Muslim believers. Some Muslims continued to express privately their feelings of stress and scrutiny in professional and educational settings because of their religion.

A synagogue exists in Asmara, but there are not enough adherents for regular services.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. Embassy representatives met periodically with government officials to raise religious freedom concerns, including the detention of members of unregistered religious groups and the lack of an alternative service option for conscientious objectors refusing to bear arms for religious reasons. Officials in Washington, D.C. shared similar concerns with the Eritrean embassy. Embassy staff also met with leaders and other representatives of most religious groups.

Embassy officials raised issues of religious freedom with a wide range of partners, including Asmara-based and regionally based diplomats accredited to the government, UN officials, and other international organization representatives. The government's suspension of the American Center in 2022 limited in-person public diplomacy programming on religious tolerance, but the embassy was able to conduct some activities related to interfaith dialogue during the year. The embassy used social media and outreach programs to engage the public, especially in the Eritrean diaspora, and highlight the commitment of the United States to religious freedom.

Since 2004, Eritrea has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, section 402(b), for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing restrictions referenced in 22 CFR 126.1 pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.