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Eritrea

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution, which the Government has not implemented, provides for freedom of religion; however, in practice the Government severely restricted this right for all but the four government approved 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 the attitudes of local authorities.

The Government's already poor record on freedom for minority religious groups continued to worsen 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 attempts to force recantations. While there were no reports of torture of religious detainees during the reporting period, some religious detainees were held in harsh conditions that included extreme temperature fluctuations with limited or no access to family. Following a 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 religions approved of and subsequently registered by the Government. These closures, the Government's failure to register any of the groups that had applied for registration, and the restriction on holding religious meetings, which was arbitrarily enforced, 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. There also were reports that some individuals encouraged harassment of these 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 an area of 48,489 square miles, and its population is approximately 3.6 million. Although reliable statistics are not available, it is estimated that 60 percent of the population is Sunni and 30 percent is Orthodox Christian. The population also includes a small number of Roman Catholics (about 5percent), Protestants (about 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 (less than 1 percent). The population in the eastern and western lowlands is predominantly Muslim and in the highlands is predominantly Christian. There are very few atheists. Religious participation is high among all ethnic groups.

Within geographic and ethnic groups, the majority of the Tigrinya are Orthodox Christian, with the exception of the Djiberti Tigrinya, who are Muslim. Most 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 Roman Catholic. More than half of the Kunama are Catholic, with a large minority of Muslims and some who practice traditional indigenous religions. The central and southern highlands, which are generally more developed than the lowlands, are populated predominantly by Christian Tigrinyas as well as some Muslim Djiberti Tigrinya and Saho. The Afar and Rashaida, as well as some 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 most Tigre live in the western lowlands.

Foreign missionaries operate, including representatives of the Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim faiths. Some missionaries and representatives of the restricted unregistered religious groups are present 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, Norwegian Church Aid, Lutheran World Federation, Samaritan's Purse, 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, the Baha'is, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

In 2002, the Minister of Information issued a decree that all religions except for the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church must fill out registration applications and cease religious activities and services until these applications were approved. 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 with other religious groups already present, names and personal information of religious leaders, detailed information on assets and property owned by the group, and sources of funding from abroad. 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 four religious groups fully complied with registration requirements over 3 years ago and continued to inquire with the concerned government offices. Several religious groups have complied partially with the registration requirements, and some have chosen not to submit any documentation. The country's representative at the U.N.'s Commission on Human Rights stated on April 5 that the Seventh-day Adventist Church's registration application would be "finalized in the near future." The Church's application had not been approved by the end of the period covered by this report.

The four government registered religious groups were not required to fill out the same registration forms as other groups, 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, and have reportedly done so.

A presidential decree declaring that Jehovah's Witnesses had "forsaken their nationality" by refusing to vote or perform required military service continued to result in economic, employment, and travel difficulties for many members of the group, 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 holy days are recognized as official holidays by the Government: Christmas (both Orthodox and non-Orthodox), Epiphany (Christian), Eid al-Adha (Muslim), Good Friday (Christian), Easter (Christian), the Prophet Muhammed's birthday (Muslim), New Year (Orthodox), Meskel (Orthodox), and Eid al-Fitr (Muslim).

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Islam and Orthodox Christianity are practiced widely and are for the most part tolerated, with persons allowed to worship freely. There is a centuries-old history of tolerance and peaceful coexistence between Christianity and Islam in the country. Following the 2002 government decree that certain religious groups must register or cease all religious activities, religious facilities not belonging to the four government-approved religious groups were forced to close. Authorities in the Office of Religious Affairs told religious groups that home prayer meetings would be permitted, but the government did not fully respect this guidance during the reporting period. They were also informed that a standing law would be used to prevent un-registered religious groups from holding political or other gatherings in private homes of more than three to five persons. In practice, authorities arbitrarily enforce this law.

Authorities generally have not hindered the four groups that filled out their registration applications in 2002 - the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Faith Mission Church, and the Baha'i Faith -- in holding home prayer or private study meetings, although like other unregistered groups their houses of worship remain closed, and they are not permitted to meet in public settings. Religious groups such as the Kale Hiwot (Baptists), Full Gospel Church, and Meserete Kristos (Mennonite) Church

have complied with some, but not all, of the registration requirements. Treatment of these and other unregistered religious groups often varied depending on the locale. Some local authorities allow unregistered groups to worship in homes or rented spaces whereas others do not allow them to meet at all.

The Government closely monitors the activities and movements of unregistered religious groups and members, including nonreligious social functions attended by members. The Government also closed down an Orthodox congregation known as Medhane Alem, whose religious beliefs or services it did not approve of, and continued to harass its members, placing some in prolonged detention. In October 2004, three men that the Government considered to be organizers were jailed without charges and remain in detention.

In 2003, the Government denied visa applications for representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses 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 to comment on political matters. No religious groups – registered or unregistered – are allowed to produce religious periodicals. The Office of Religious Affairs within the Office of the Presidency monitors compliance with these proscriptions.

All religious entities must receive authorization from the Office of Religious Affairs to print and distribute documents. The Office of Religious Affairs routinely approves requests for authorization from registered groups and four unregistered churches; however, other unregistered churches have been unable to obtain authorization to print documents for distribution within their congregations. On March 22, authorities reportedly closed a printing shop for 2 days and seized an unregistered church's printed materials that had not been approved by the Office of Religious Affairs.

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 registered religions. Military members reportedly are sometimes allowed to possess certain religious books to pray privately in their barracks but not in groups. Several members of unregistered religious groups reportedly were arrested for violating this rule.

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

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There are numerous credible reports that several hundred members of unregistered religious groups have been detained or imprisoned at various times since 2002. During the reporting period, there were reliable reports that authorities detained at least 500 members of unregistered religious groups without charges. Many were released after detentions of several days or less, but some spent longer periods in confinement without charges and without access to legal counsel. Government restrictions make it difficult to determine the precise number of religious prisoners, but the number of long-term prisoners continues to grow.

Individuals who are jailed for reasons of faith are reportedly held at various locations, including facilities administered by the military, such as at Mai Sewa outside the capital, and the more distant Sawa, as well as police stations inside Asmara and other cities. Detainees are not formally charged or accorded due process, and generally do not have access to their families. While many are ostensibly jailed for evasion of military conscription, significant numbers are being held solely for their religious beliefs and some are held in harsh conditions that include extreme temperature fluctuations.

The Government does not excuse individuals who object to military conscription for religious reasons or reasons of conscience and does not allow alternative national service. Based on their religious beliefs, most members of Jehovah's Witnesses have refused to participate in national military service or to vote. Some Muslims also have objected to universal national service because of the requirement that Muslim women must perform military duty.

Although members of several religious groups, including Muslims, reportedly have been imprisoned in past years for failure to participate in national military 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 military 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. They are also prohibited from having their marriages legalized by

the civil authorities.

In conducting searches for national military service evaders, security forces have targeted gatherings of unregistered religious groups with a frequency not characteristic of its treatment of other groups' social gatherings or religious services, including those of the four government-approved religions.

There were relatively few arrests during home prayer or Bible study meetings reported in the first half of the reporting period, but the trend toward large-scale arrests at socio-religious gatherings and harassment of individuals resumed in the second half.

The following is a sampling of reports from individual religious leaders, members of registered and unregistered religious groups, NGOs, and family members of detainees.

In December 2004, security forces reportedly detained 60 members of the Rema Church in Asmara while they were participating in a home prayer meeting. A total of 25 of the detainees were released within 48 hours and 22 were released shortly thereafter. The remaining 13 detainees, including a pastor in his 70s, are reportedly being held at a prison in Mai Sewa, in the Maekel Region.

On January 9, 2005, security forces detained 25 former Roman Catholic Church members known as "Tahadesso" (reformist) in Asmara during a wedding rehearsal. While 22 were eventually released, three remained incarcerated in Wi'a at the end of the reporting period.

On January 9, authorities reportedly detained 115 members of the Full Gospel Church and the Kaile Hiwot Church in Barentu at a double-wedding ceremony. A total of 67 of these members were allegedly detained at the Sawa military training facility in the west and were released on April 13. The remaining 48 members, who are of national service age, are reportedly being detained for national service evasion and are being held at a military facility near the town of Barentu.

On January 21, security officials reportedly arrested four persons, of whom three are senior pastors of the Full Gospel Church, at the Church's offices in Asmara. The three pastors -- Kidane Ghebremeskel, Abraham Belay, and Samuel Tesfamichael -- reportedly remain jailed in Asmara. The fourth individual was reportedly released after 1 month of detention.

On January 30, authorities detained 45 members of the Full Gospel Church during home prayer meetings in two neighborhoods of Asmara (Adi Guadad and Mai Chot). One member, who was reportedly under the age of 18, was released after one night of detention. Sixteen members who were reportedly evading national service are being held in Mai Sewa. The remaining 28 detainees were reportedly released after several weeks.

On February 4, security forces reportedly arrested 14 members of the Kaile Hiwot Church during a home Bible study meeting at Adi Tekelzan, located between the cities of Asmara and Keren. Thirteen of the members were allegedly evading national service and are being held at Mai Sewa prison, along with their pastor, Issa Mekonnen, who is not of national service age.

On February 12, authorities reportedly detained 15 women belonging to the Medhane Alem congregation for approximately 1 month for holding a home prayer meeting in Keren. All agreed to sign, as a condition of their release, a document stating that they would not take part in their congregation's activities in the future.

On February 16, security officials reportedly detained 17 members of the Rema Church at a home prayer meeting in Adi Quala. Ten members were reportedly released after 2 weeks, while the remaining seven are being held in Gelalo for national service evasion.

On February 19, security forces reportedly detained 27 students and teachers of the Medhane Alem congregation in Asmara. Five teachers, who are also instructors at the University of Asmara, are reportedly being held at Mai Sewa, while the 22 students were released to their parents on February 20.

On May 28, security forces detained more than 200 persons who had gathered at a private reception hall for a marriage organized by the Kaile Hiwot Church in Asmara. Once in custody, they were reportedly separated into groups belonging to registered and unregistered churches. Those belonging to registered churches were released within three days after signing agreements not to take part in religious activities of unregistered groups. Members of unregistered churches were required to sign a statement prior to their release that they would join one of the government-authorized churches. Jehovah's Witnesses picked up in the raid are reportedly still being held for refusing to recant their faith. There were reportedly 88 persons, of whom 35 were women, who were still being held at the end of the reporting period.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been singled out for particularly harsh treatment. According to credible sources, a total of 22 Jehovah's Witnesses are being held without charges or trial, at least 9 of whom are being

detained for allegedly failing to perform national military service. At the end of the period covered by this report, eight Jehovah's Witnesses, most of whom had been arrested in June 2004, remained detained at the Mai Sewa facility. These Jehovah's Witnesses are all above the cut-off age for national service eligibility, which is 40 for men and 27 for women.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been jailed in harsh conditions for varying periods, at least three for more than 10 years, reportedly for evading compulsory military service; however, the maximum legal penalty for refusing to perform national service is 3 years. Ministry of Justice officials have denied that any Jehovah's Witnesses are in detention without charge, although they acknowledge that some of them and a number of Muslims were jailed for evading national service.

Of the approximately 40 Jehovah's Witnesses reportedly arrested in January 2004 while praying in a private home in Asmara,³ who ranged in age from 55 to 94 were released in September, 2004. Nearly all of the remainder were reportedly released during the reporting period.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports that the security forces tortured those detained for their religious beliefs, although detention conditions were sometimes harsh. There were, however, credible reports that some of the detainees were required to sign statements as a condition of release renouncing or agreeing not to practice their faith or, in a small number of cases, to "return to the faith of their fathers," which some detainees took to mean becoming a member of the Orthodox Church. In some cases in which detainees refused to sign such documents, relatives were asked to do so on their behalf.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were reports that police forced some adherents of unregistered 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 registered 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 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 military service, a refusal that is widely judged as unpatriotic. There was also social prejudice against other unregistered religious groups. Some persons reportedly cooperated with government authorities by reporting on and harassing members of those groups.

Leaders of the four principal religions meet routinely, enjoy excellent interfaith relations, and engage in efforts to foster cooperation and understanding among their followers. Few religious leaders in the country have taken a strong public stance in defense of freedom of conscience for all faiths.

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. U.S. Embassy officials meet regularly with leaders of the religious community. They were also able to meet for the first time since 2002 with the Government's Director of Religious Affairs.

The U.S. Ambassador and other Embassy officers have raised the cases of detention and restrictions on unregistered religious groups with 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.

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