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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Eritrea

[Covers the period from July 1, 2008, to June 30, 2009]

The Constitution, ratified by the National Assembly in 1997, provides for religious freedom; however, the Government has yet to implement the Constitution. Although the Government requires religious groups to register, since 2002 it has not approved any registrations beyond the country's four principal religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea, Islam, and the Roman Catholic Church.

The Government's record on religious freedom remained poor. The Government continued to harass and detain thousands of members of unapproved religious groups and retained substantial control over the four approved religious groups. The Government failed to approve religious groups that fulfilled the registration requirements and arrested persons during religious gatherings. The Government held religious prisoners in harsh conditions for long periods and without due process. There continued to be reports of forced recantations of faith and torture of religious detainees.

Citizens generally were tolerant of one another in the practice of their religion, with the exception of societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal groups. Some individuals viewed failure to perform the required military service as a sign of disloyalty and encouraged harassment of religious groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses.

The U.S. Government makes regular efforts to discuss religious freedom with the Government. Despite repeated attempts, government authorities responsible for religious affairs did not grant U.S. embassy officials opportunities to specifically discuss instances of religious freedom abuse. On January 16, 2009, the U.S. Secretary of State re-designated the country a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) 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 a population of 5.5 million. Although reliable statistics are not available, it is estimated that 50 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, 30 percent is Orthodox Christian, and 13 percent is Roman Catholic. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is. Approximately 2 percent of the population practices indigenous religious beliefs. The population is predominantly Muslim in the eastern and western lowlands and predominantly Christian in the highlands. Religious participation is high among all ethnic groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides the freedom to practice any religion; however, the Government has yet to implement the Constitution since its ratification in 1997.

The Government officially recognizes four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea, Islam, and the Roman Catholic Church. The Government has not approved the registrations of the Meherete Yesus Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Faith Mission Church, and the Baha'i Faith, despite their being fully compliant with the registration requirements since 2002. Those registrations require only the president's signature for full approval.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Islamic New Year, Epiphany, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Good Friday, Easter, Meskel, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Christmas.

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

The law does not provide for conscientious objection to military service. A presidential decree declared that Jehovah's Witnesses had "forsaken their nationality" because they refuse to vote or perform required military service. This decree resulted in economic, employment, and travel difficulties for many members of the group, especially civil servants and merchants. In addition, some Muslims objected to universal national service based on the requirement that Muslim women must perform military duty.

The Government holds individuals jailed for their religious affiliation at various locations, including facilities administered by the military, such as Mai Serwa, Sawa, and Gelalo, as well as police stations in the capital and other cities. During the reporting period, the Government reportedly built a new camp in the desert town of Meiter specifically for religious detainees. Often, detainees are not formally charged, accorded due process, or allowed access to their families. While many are ostensibly jailed for evasion of conscription, significant numbers are held solely for their religious beliefs. Detainees often are held in harsh conditions, such as underground or in shipping containers that are exposed to extreme temperature fluctuations. Many detainees are required to recant their religious beliefs as a precondition of release.

Religious groups must receive authorization from the Office of Religious Affairs to print and distribute documents. The Office of Religious Affairs routinely approves requests from approved religious organizations; however, unregistered churches occasionally are unable to obtain authorization to print materials for distribution within their congregations.

Religious groups require the approval of the Government to conduct religious services or other activities. The Office of Religious Affairs reviews applications. Registration requirements 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 already present, names and personal information of religious leaders, detailed information on assets and property the group owns, conformity to "local culture," and sources of funding from abroad. Complete registrations require the President's signature.

Religious organizations must obtain government approval to build facilities for worship. A government proclamation outlines rules governing relations between religious organizations and foreign sponsors.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government's record on religious freedom remained poor. The Government continued to harass and detain members of unapproved religious groups and retained significant control over the four approved religious groups.

The Government forbids what it deems to be radical forms of Islam and severely restricts numerous small Protestant churches, Baha'is, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Following a 2002 government decree that all religious groups must register or cease all religious activities, religious facilities that did not belong to the four officially recognized religious groups were forced to close. Some local authorities allowed unregistered groups to worship in homes or rented spaces, whereas others did not allow such groups to meet at all. The Government continued to disrupt home-based worship and arrested those who hosted home prayer meetings, particularly if the gatherings consisted of more than five persons.

During the reporting period, authorities shut down at least one Seventh-day Adventist church in Asmara.

By December 2008 the Government evicted the remaining foreign missionaries by either refusing to renew their work permits or simply ordering them to leave; the policy had been ongoing for years. During the reporting period, reportedly more than 18 Italian monks and several Catholic nuns were asked to leave. Retired missionaries and representatives of the religious groups awaiting registration approval remained in-country but kept an extremely low profile for fear of abuse of their congregations.

The government-controlled media continued to characterize evangelical religious groups as imperialistic entities that promoted religious intolerance among citizens. In February 2008 the Government distributed a notice discouraging neighborhoods from allowing unapproved religious groups to use public burial grounds. Government officials routinely denied exit visas to persons who admitted affiliation with an unapproved religious group.

Military personnel were sometimes allowed to possess certain religious books to pray privately. This practice continued to be inconsistently applied. There were reports from Christian members of the military that Bibles were confiscated and sometimes burned.

The Government continued its involvement in the affairs of the four approved religious groups and required them to provide a list of religious leaders for enrollment in military/national service. 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. The Government continued to provide the Catholic Church with limited duration national service exemption cards for all religious workers and seminarians.

There continued to be reports that the Government seized religious property during the reporting period. In June 2008 the military expropriated property of the Catholic Church in Asmara.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Authorities regularly harassed, arrested, and detained members of various religious groups. The Government closely monitored the activities and movements of unregistered religious groups and members, including nonreligious social functions attended by members. Persons arrested were often detained for extended periods without due process.

During the reporting period, there were reliable reports that authorities detained several hundred members of unregistered religious groups without charges. Some were released after detentions of several days or less, while others spent longer periods in confinement without charge and without access to legal counsel. Government restrictions made it difficult to determine the precise number of religious prisoners at

any one time, and releases sometimes went unreported; however, the number of long-term religious prisoners continued to grow. At the end of the reporting period, reports indicated there were more than 3,000 Christians from unregistered groups detained in prison. These reports included nearly 40 leaders and pastors of Pentecostal churches in detention, some for more than three years without due process.

It is unknown how many of the 300 individuals detained during the previous reporting period remained incarcerated. Many of them were held in military prisons for not having performed required national military service but most for simply belonging to unregistered religious groups. Many were held for not belonging to any specific religious group and were told they would be released after joining one of the four approved religious groups. Several pastors and dozens of women were among those imprisoned. Many refused to recant their faith and continued to be detained in civilian and military detention facilities across the country; however, some were released after recanting their faith. There were reports that some religious prisoners died due to lack of medical treatment.

During the reporting period, the Government reportedly built a new camp in the desert town of Meiter specifically for religious detainees. The prison is isolated and does not allow visitors. The prison reportedly holds 150 to 200 prisoners, all held either for belonging to an unapproved religious group or for not belonging to a specific religious group.

There were numerous reports during the reporting period of government officials breaking into the houses of evangelicals and confiscating valuables.

On June 28, 2009, police arrested 22 Jehovah's Witnesses as they met for worship in Asmara. Most of the arrested were wives or daughters of previously arrested men, leaving entire households imprisoned in some instances. Those arrested remained in detention at the end of the reporting period.

In May 2009 the Government transferred dozens of prisoners, including Jehovah's Witnesses and members of evangelical religious groups, from police stations in Asmara to the Meiter detention center. In January 2009 two religious detainees reportedly died at Meiter from a combination of physical abuse and denial of medical treatment.

In April 2009 security officials searched two residences of Jehovah's Witnesses. They reportedly assaulted a young woman at each house, removing one from the home for further interrogation. The Government also reportedly threatened to arrest prisoners' families to compel testimony against other Jehovah's Witnesses.

On January 11, 2009, police arrested 15 members of the Kalet Hiwot Church in the city of Keren. In addition, 34 members of the same group were arrested in November 2008.

In January 2009 the Government reportedly carried out countrywide arrests of influential Muslims, describing the 60 Muslims arrested as "radical Islamists." In May 2009 authorities released 24 of them with a warning to keep their beards shaven and not to engage in "radical" activities. By the end of the reporting period, the Government had not pressed charges against those who remained in prison nor did it produce any evidence of criminal activities.

In early 2009 the Government began confiscating vehicles marked with license plates designated for religious groups. The mass confiscation severely limited the abilities of the religious groups to perform daily tasks. Although the Government released some of the vehicles, many remained impounded with no explanation.

According to Open Doors USA, a U.S.-based Christian organization, in December 2008 authorities arrested at least 49 leaders of unregistered churches in Asmara.

In December 2008 authorities arrested a prominent professional associated with an

evangelical church. Upon his release in March 2009, government officials reportedly warned him to cease his religious practices and become Orthodox.

In December 2008 the Government arrested more than 17 leaders of "noncompliant" religious groups, including a prominent doctor.

In November 2008 credible reports stated the Government arrested more than 110 evangelical Christians, including members of the Kalet Hiwot Church, the Full Gospel Church, and the Church of the Living God.

The Government continued to punish some students at military and private boarding schools for possessing Bibles. In October 2008 government authorities reportedly confiscated and burned more than 1,500 Bibles from incoming military trainees. Those who protested the burning were allegedly locked in metal shipping containers.

The Government maintained close financial ties with the Eritrean Orthodox Church in Kenya, which reported that planted agents stole church funds. On September 13, 2008, after a church official began to investigate the church's finances, Eritrean government officials in Nairobi assaulted the church official at his residence and stole \$2,570 (180,000 Kenyan shillings). These officials later shut down the church, preventing its public use.

On July 13, 2008, a woman detained for her religious affiliation died in the Wi'a Military Camp. Authorities reportedly refused to provide her with malaria medication. According to Compass Direct, a U.S.-based Christian news service, two others detained for religious reasons died of untreated malaria in June and October 2008.

On July 8, 2008, authorities in Asmara reportedly began arresting Jehovah's Witnesses, primarily men older than 50, at their residences and workplaces.

In June 2008 Compass Direct reported that plainclothes police arrested two Christians in Massawa for proselytizing.

The Government continued to detain, in Adi Abeto military prison, 28 of the 34 evangelical Christians arrested in May 2008 in Keren during a house raid.

The Government continued to detain, in the Wi'a Military Camp, 25 Protestant Christians arrested in May 2008 in Asmara.

In February 2008 a prominent Muslim leader reportedly died in prison after being held for two years. There were reports the Government continued to detain 180 Muslims who refused to honor the presence of the mufti appointed by the Government in 1993.

The Government continued to detain 28 of the 38 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses who were arrested in February 2008.

In February 2008 authorities released 35 Christians in Massawa after imprisoning them for six weeks.

In early 2008 authorities fired a teacher of the Jehovah's Witnesses faith for refusing to perform military service.

The Government continued to detain, in the Wi'a Military Camp, the 35 men, women, and children who belonged to the unapproved Faith Missions Church and who were arrested on Christmas Eve 2007.

The Government continued to detain the pastor of the Kalet Hiwot Church who was arrested in the Dekemhare region in October 2007. In late May and early June 2007 authorities detained the pastor and 20 members of his congregation.

The whereabouts of a priest arrested in October 2007 during an approved Bible study class at the Orthodox Church remained unknown during the reporting period.

In October 2007 authorities detained 45 members of a nonregistered, unapproved Christian church and beat the church leader severely.

In October 2007 a prominent evangelical singer was granted asylum in Denmark. The Government had released the woman for medical treatment for injuries sustained from severe beatings during two years in harsh detention conditions.

In September 2007 a 33-year-old woman, arrested at a church service of an unregistered denomination and imprisoned for 18 months, died in the Wi'a Military Training Center, reportedly after officials tortured her for refusing to recant her faith.

In July 2007 police invaded a home-based church service and detained five individuals.

In April 2007 nearly 80 members of an unregistered religious group attending a worship service were arrested and detained for one month despite having received authorization from the Office of Religious Affairs to hold the service.

In February 2007 there were credible reports another member of an unregistered religious group died at the Adi Nefase Military Confinement facility near Assab after enduring torture and illness.

In February 2007 police arrested 10 members of an unregistered church at a party following a wedding. These members were later released on \$10,000 (150,000 Nakfa) bail after promising not to practice their religion.

In January 2007 police arrested eight members of the Medhane Alem congregation of the Orthodox Christian Church. They were employees of various government ministries and arrested while at work.

The Government continued to detain the pastor of an unregistered church who was arrested in Asmara in January 2007.

Patriarch Abune Antonios, deposed from the Eritrean Orthodox Church in 2005 by the government-controlled synod, remained under house arrest, with few visitors allowed and no medical treatment. During the reporting period, the patriarch's health continued to deteriorate. In January 2007 there were credible reports that government officials raided his home and removed all his patriarchal vestments and personal religious items.

During November 2006 the Government undertook a large-scale campaign to arrest members of unregistered religious groups in the Mendefera region, reportedly detaining more than 150 Protestants from the Church of Living God, Kalet Hiwot, and other churches.

In October 2006 there were credible reports that two members of an unregistered church died from injuries in a military camp in Adi Quala after being severely beaten and tortured.

In October 2006 police arrested 12 members of an unregistered church at a private home in Asmara. Two of the individuals reportedly died shortly after the arrests after being tortured and severely beaten.

In August 2006 police arrested 29 members of unregistered churches during raids on home prayer meetings in Asmara, Keren, and Massawa.

In August 2006 some evangelical Christian students enrolled at the Mai Nefhi boarding school were released from detention, but only after they signed documents recanting

their faith. The released students were prevented from registering for school.

In conducting searches for national military service evaders, security forces continued to target gatherings of unregistered religious groups more frequently than those of other social and religious organizations.

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 followers of other religious groups for similar actions. (Jehovah's Witnesses are normally willing to perform nonmilitary national service). At least three Jehovah's Witnesses were detained for 15 years, reportedly for evading compulsory military service, far beyond the maximum legal penalty of two years for refusing to perform national service. 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, and exit visas. They were also prohibited from having civil authorities legalize their marriages.

According to numerous sources, 63 Jehovah's Witnesses remained in detention without charges or trial during the reporting period. Although authorities detained Jehovah's Witnesses for allegedly failing to perform national military service, many of those detained were older than the cut-off age for national service eligibility (54 years for men and 47 years for women).

Forced Religious Conversion

There continued to be reports that police forced some adherents of unregistered religious groups held in detention to sign statements saying they abandoned their faith and to join the Orthodox Christian Church as a precondition of their release. These individuals typically faced imprisonment and/or severe beating until they agreed to sign the documents. Reports indicated these individuals were also monitored afterward to ensure they did not practice or proselytize for their unregistered religion. In some cases authorities demanded letters from priests of the Orthodox Church confirming that the individuals returned to the Orthodox Church. Similarly, police forced individuals who chose not to identify with a specific religious group, approved or otherwise, to choose an approved religious group or face continued detention.

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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Citizens generally accepted religious pluralism. Christians and Muslims in Asmara often celebrated their holidays jointly.

Jehovah's Witnesses, however, faced societal discrimination because of their refusal to participate in the 1993 independence referendum and their refusal to perform national military service. There was also some prejudice against other unregistered religious groups. Some persons reportedly cooperated with government authorities by reporting on, and harassing, members of those groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government makes regular efforts to discuss religious freedom with the Government. Despite repeated attempts, government authorities responsible for religious affairs did not grant U.S. embassy officials opportunities to specifically discuss instances of religious freedom abuse.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers raised the cases of detention and

restrictions on unregistered religious groups in prior reporting periods with officials in the President's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the leaders of the sole legal political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice.

In September 2004 the U.S. Secretary of State first designated Eritrea as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On January 16, 2009, the U.S. Secretary of State re-designated the country a CPC. As the action under the IRFA, the Secretary designated the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a), pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act.
