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July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Eritrea

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
September 13, 2011

[Covers six-month period from 1 July 2010 to 31 December 2010 (USDOS is shifting to a calendar year reporting period)]

The 1997 constitution protects religious freedom; however, the government has yet to implement the constitution in law and in practice. 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 generally did not respect religious freedom in law and in practice. The government continued to harass and detain thousands of members of registered and unregistered religious groups and retained substantial control over the four registered religious groups. The government failed to approve religious groups that fulfilled the registration requirements and arrested persons during religious gatherings. The government subjected religious prisoners to harsh conditions and held them for long periods of time, without due process. There continued to be reports of forced renunciations of faith, torture, and deaths while in custody.

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Citizens generally were tolerant of those practicing other

religions; exceptions included negative societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostal groups, and conscientious objectors to military service based on religious beliefs. Some viewed refusal to perform the required military service as disloyalty to the country and encouraged harassment of those unwilling to serve in the military.

The U.S. government attempts to raise religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. However, government authorities responsible for religious affairs would not discuss abuses of religious freedom with U.S. embassy officials. On January 16, 2009, the U.S. Secretary of State redesignated Eritrea 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 three-and-a-half to four 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 in total constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Bahais. Approximately 2 percent of the population follows indigenous religious beliefs. The population is predominantly Muslim in the eastern and western lowlands and mainly Christian in the highlands. Religious participation is high among all ethnic groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution protects religious freedom; however, the government has yet to implement the constitution in law or in practice since its ratification in 1997.

The government has officially registered four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea, Islam, and the Roman Catholic Church. The government has not approved the applications for registration of the Meherte Yesus Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Faith Mission Church, or the Bahai Faith, despite their having met all registration requirements since 2002. Those registrations require only the president's signature for full approval.

Religious groups must receive authorization from the Office of Religious Affairs to print and distribute documents. The Office of Religious Affairs routinely approved such requests from recognized religious organizations.

Religious groups must obtain government approval to conduct religious services or activities. The Office of Religious Affairs reviews applications, which must include: a description of the history of the religious group in the country, an explanation of the uniqueness or benefit the group offers compared with other religious groups present, names and personal information of the group's leaders, detailed information on assets, how the group conforms to "local culture," and a declaration of all foreign sources of funding. Unregistered churches also reported that the government asked for the names and addresses of all members as part of application procedures.

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

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

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

The government required students to attend the Sawa Military Training Camp (Sawa) during their final year of high school. Conscientious objector status was not recognized. Sawa was noted for its abuse of trainees, especially young women and individuals whose religious beliefs included maintaining conscientious objector status. Individuals whose religious beliefs included maintaining conscientious objector status were especially likely to quit high school and attempt to leave the country illegally to avoid this obligatory military training, despite the shoot-to-kill order for those attempting such action. Several adult Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals have been imprisoned at Sawa, some since 1994. None are known to have been released at the end of the reporting period. Individuals who do not complete military training do not receive military discharge papers, which limits economic, employment, and travel opportunities. In addition, some Muslims objected to the requirement that Muslim women perform military duty.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

The application for an exit visa requires a designation of religious affiliation, and Christians must include their denomination in the application. Members of registered faiths can often obtain exit visas if they have completed national service requirements and were of retirement age. Members of unregistered faiths require additional permission from the Office of Religious Affairs, which has been reported to grant permission, deny permission, or arrest applicants on the spot for practicing an unrecognized faith.

The government forbids religious practice outside the four recognized faiths, and even recognized faiths are often forbidden from managing their own operations and finances. The government has appointed both the mufti (head) of the Islamic faith in the country and the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church (the former patriarch remains under house arrest), as well as numerous other lower-level positions. The government maintained control over the operations of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. A government-appointed lay administrator managed church operations and controlled all church donations. All four recognized religious groups were also required to provide a list of members for possible enrollment in military and national service. Those who publically protested such direct government management were branded as radicals and were imprisoned indefinitely in harsh conditions, even if they were members of recognized religious faiths. Unregistered faith groups also reported having their mail confiscated. In addition, they avoid local Internet providers when sending or receiving information related to their faith, for fear of being monitored.

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

Religious facilities that did not belong to the four officially recognized religious groups were forced to close following a 2002 government decree that all religious groups must register or cease all religious activities, and numerous large abandoned churches can be seen in Asmara. Some local authorities allowed unregistered groups to worship in homes or rented spaces, whereas others did not allow such groups to meet. The government continued to disrupt home-based worship and arrested those who hosted home prayer meetings.

Military personnel were sometimes allowed to possess certain religious books and 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, and carrying a Bible has been used as grounds for arrest.

In September the government convened a meeting of religious leaders to inform them that no exemptions from national service would be allowed for individuals who wish to pursue religious training, even though the government had previously allowed exemptions in some circumstances. Persons who have sought approval to begin religious training after completing national service have been denied in the past. This new policy is an attempt to disrupt the ability of approved religious groups to train future leaders.

Older religious leaders, who graduated from high school and started religious training before the government mandated 12th grade national service at the Sawa Military Training Camp, were issued travel identification cards to facilitate in-country travel. However, during this meeting of religious leaders held in September, the government stated that these travel cards would no longer be valid. While no longer honoring these travel identification cards will prevent religious leaders from passing checkpoints where proof of status is required, the government simultaneously removed numerous checkpoints, making the impact of this action on freedom of movement unclear.

The government continued to hold property seized from both recognized and unrecognized faiths in unannounced raids. The government retained vehicles belonging to religious groups that authorities impounded in early 2009.

In December 2009 the United Nations imposed sanctions on the country after the government engaged in arming, training, and equipping groups, including al-Shabaab (designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the United States), that aimed to destabilize the region, and after the government occupied disputed territory on its border with Djibouti. Following imposition of sanctions, the government-controlled media branded the United Nations and Western governments as imperialist entities. As a result, harassment of unrecognized religious groups increased, many of which have long been characterized as under the control of Western governments.

In April 2010 governmental actions to strengthen control over nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) created conditions that forced the closure of the Catholic Relief Services, making the Catholic Church increasingly dependent upon the government and less able to care for the community and its followers. Throughout the reporting period, the government harassed the Catholic Church, which was unable to operate freely. In November 2009 the government confiscated building materials the church had purchased legally. The government provided no letter or other warning with regard to the

confiscation. Building materials were especially hard to obtain because of the severe shortage and the need to purchase materials from government-controlled businesses.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

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

Authorities regularly harassed, arrested, and detained members of registered and unregistered religious groups. The government closely monitored the activities and movements of unregistered religious group members, including nonreligious social functions attended by members. Persons arrested for religious reasons were often detained for extended periods in harsher conditions than the general prison population.

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

Although members of several religious groups were imprisoned in past years for failure to participate in required national military service, the government singled out Jehovah's Witnesses to receive harsher treatment than that given to others. Jehovah's Witnesses and other conscientious objectors were normally willing to perform nonmilitary national service. At least three Jehovah's Witnesses have been detained for 15 years, reportedly for evading compulsory military service, a term far beyond the maximum legal penalty of two years 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 also were prohibited from having civil authorities legalize their marriages.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses officials, at the end of the reporting period, 58 of their members were in prison for their faith. Jehovah's Witnesses members Paulos Eyassu, Isaac Mogos, and Negede Teklemariam, arrested in 1994 due to their objection to military service, remained in prison. The government did not file charges against them, and they did not receive a trial.

There continued to be reports that police forced some adherents of unregistered religious groups held in detention to sign statements declaring that they recanted their faith and agreed to join a recognized faith as a condition of their release. These individuals typically faced imprisonment and even severe beatings until they agreed to sign the documents. Reports indicated these persons also were monitored afterward to

ensure they did not practice or proselytize for their unregistered religion and attended a church or mosque from an officially recognized faith. In some cases authorities demanded letters from priests of the Orthodox Church confirming that the individuals attended the Orthodox Church. Similarly, police forced individuals who chose not to identify with a specific religious group, registered or otherwise, to choose a registered religious group or face continued detention.

The government held individuals jailed for their religious affiliation at various locations, including military-administered facilities, such as Mai Serwa, Sawa, Meiter, and Gelalo, as well as police stations in the capital and other cities. Prisoners were held in harsh conditions and suffered life-threatening injuries and denial of medical treatment. Often, prisoners were not formally charged, accorded due process, or allowed access to their families. While many were ostensibly jailed for evasion of conscription, significant numbers were held solely for their religious beliefs. Many prisoners were required to recant their religious beliefs or pay fines as a precondition of their release.

There were reliable reports that authorities newly detained at least 103 members of unregistered religious groups without legitimate charges during the reporting period. Additional credible second-hand reports were received of numerous mass arrests of Christian groups in the region stretching from Asmara south to the Ethiopian border between September and December, but the number of individuals detained is unknown as the Eritrean government did not allow official travel to these regions. Some of those detained were released after several days or less, while others spent longer periods in confinement without charge and without access to legal counsel, or were not released. Government restrictions on travel and intimidation of sources 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 increased. Meiter prison, which was constructed in 2009 to hold religious and other prisoners, was reportedly filled to capacity. At the end of the reporting period, 2,000 to 3,000 members of unregistered groups remained in prison, 10 of whom were Pentecostal leaders and pastors detained for more than three years without due process.

It was unknown how many of the at least 103 individuals detained during the reporting period remained incarcerated or were released on the condition of recanting their faith and/or paying a fine. Some religious detainees were held in military prisons for failing to perform required national military service, but most were held for simply belonging to unregistered religious groups.

According to the Dutch branch of Open Doors, Yemane Kahasay, of the Kale-Hiwot Church in Medefera, died in the Metier prison in July after being tortured for 18 months

and denied medical treatment. At the time of his death, Yemane was suffering from a severe case of malaria and had been placed in solitary confinement for refusing to sign a form recanting his faith.

According to International Christian Concern, a U.S.-based Christian organization, the governor of the Southern Zone ordered a crackdown on Christians living in the province in October and November. Security officials rounded up Christians from the cities of Mendefera, Dekemhare, and Dibarwa. Security officials also confiscated televisions, video players, and other electronic equipment that belonged to the Christians. Most of the detained belong to the Full Gospel Church. Eleven remained in detention at the end of the reporting period. These mass arrests and episodes of property confiscation are consistent with reports of mass arrests occurring between September and December in the region stretching from Asmara south to the Ethiopian border.

On December 31, during official New Year's Eve celebrations, the entire 65-member Christian congregation of the Philadelphia church in Asmara was detained, and another group of 27 Christians was detained in Kuchet, a suburb of Asmara, according to reliable reports.

At the end of the reporting period, 36 Muslims arrested as "radical Islamists" in January 2009 remained in prison. The government had not pressed charges against them nor had it produced any evidence of criminal activity.

There was no additional information on the whereabouts or status of 15 members of the Kale Hiwot Church in Keren, arrested in January 2009.

There was no information on dozens of prisoners, including Jehovah's Witnesses and members of evangelical religious groups, whom the government transferred in April 2009 from police stations in Asmara to the Meiter prison.

In June 2009 police arrested 23 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. Although police released some women, two young children and their mothers remained in detention at the end of the reporting period.

In June and July 2009 unsanitary conditions led to a meningitis outbreak in Wi'a prison that caused the death of 50 prisoners, including an unknown number of religious prisoners. Released religious prisoners reported confinement in harsh conditions. Some prisoners were confined in crowded metal shipping containers holding up to 50 people and subject to extreme temperature fluctuations. Others experienced extended periods

of solitary confinement. Religious prisoners reported being confined in underground unventilated cement cells without sanitation facilities with up to 200 other prisoners. When prisoners passed out from the heat and stench, they were taken outside briefly to be revived and then returned to the underground cell. Some prisoners were hung from trees in painful positions for several weeks until they could no longer move their arms and legs, requiring other prisoners to feed and bathe them. Religious prisoners also reported being forced to walk barefoot on sharp rocks and thorns for one hour per day, beaten with hard plastic and metal rods in order to extract confessions, and threatened with death if they did not recant their faith.

In September 2009 the government called a meeting of religious groups entitled "Working Along with the Police to Prevent Crime in the Country" where religious followers were intimidated and asked to report on the religious activities of Christian groups in the neighborhoods. Members of nontraditional religious groups were reluctant to discuss their concerns with diplomatic and NGO representatives.

During September 2009, 30 religious prisoners who required hospitalization reportedly were released after agreeing to pay a large fine. According to reliable sources, the government used false charges to imprison them.

In October 2009 the government raided the home of the founding elder of the Full Gospel Church in Asmara and arrested three persons. Two days later seven others were arrested. The founding elder, who suffered from an ulcer, was taken to prison but then returned home to remain under house arrest. There was no further information on the status of the detainees at the end of the reporting period.

In December 2009 government officials arrested 27 female religious believers during prayers at a home in Asmara. During an interview with Reuters, the Minister of Information stated that he was sure they had committed a crime. There was no further information on the status of the detainees at the end of the reporting period.

While some among a group of at least 49 leaders of unregistered churches in Asmara detained in December 2009 may have been among 30 persons released in March 2010, their whereabouts could not be confirmed at the end of the reporting period. Likewise, some of the more than 17 leaders of "noncompliant" religious groups, including a prominent doctor, also may have been released in March.

There were several examples of individuals who were subjected to extreme physical violence, which in some cases proved fatal, for refusing to renounce their beliefs. On January 24, 2010, Hana Hagos Asgedom, a member of Asab Rhema Church, died of a heart attack at the Alla military camp. Hana had been detained at Wi'a military camp for

three years following her arrest in 2007 and was moved to the Alla camp when the Wi'a camp was dismantled due to a meningitis outbreak. Upon arrival at the new camp, Hana was offered a final opportunity to renounce her faith. When she refused, she was placed in solitary confinement. Shortly before her death, she reportedly endured beatings with an iron rod for refusing to have sex with the chief commander of the camp. She was then returned to her cell, received further punishment, and eventually died. On March 2, Efrem Habtemichel Hagos died of malaria and pneumonia while in solitary confinement in Adi-Nefase military camp in Assab. He reportedly was denied proper medical treatment because he refused to recant his beliefs. He was the 12th incarcerated known to have died at this camp.

On April 2, 2010, 27 members of the Asmara Full Gospel Church were arrested and held in a police station. In June several of those arrested were released, while others were moved to different police stations farther away from their families. Several of the prisoners reported being released after signing a form stating that they recanted their faith. There was no further information on the status of those still in detention at the end of the reporting period.

According to Open Doors USA, a U.S.-based Christian organization, on April 23, 2010, Senait Oqbazgi Habte died in the Sawa Military Training Center after suffering severe abuse and being denied medical treatment for malaria and severe anemia. Senait was arrested in 2008, with 15 other university students, for attending a Bible study group. She and the others were imprisoned in large metal shipping containers, where they suffered suffocating heat during the day and freezing temperatures at night. They also were deprived of needed medical treatment. Sawa officials reportedly offered Senait her freedom and medical attention if she would recant her beliefs, but she refused. Camp officials eventually relented and allowed her to be moved to the prison's medical center. However, she died shortly after her transfer.

According to International Christian Concern, on May 9, 2010, Eritrean security officials arrested 11 Christians, including women and children, in Asmara. Pastor Mesfin, Pastor Tekie, Mr. Isaac and his four children, and four women were arrested while conducting a prayer meeting at a private home in Maitemenai,

Asmara. The detainees are members of the Faith Church of Christ. The whereabouts of the detainees was unknown at the end of the reporting period.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Citizens generally accepted religious pluralism. Christians

and Muslims in Asmara often celebrated their holidays jointly. However, Jehovah's Witnesses 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 attempts to raise religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. However, government authorities responsible for religious affairs would not discuss abuses of religious freedom with U.S. embassy officials.

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