

Eritrea (93)



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Eritrea

27/4-04

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, its provisions have not yet been implemented and in practice the Government restricted this right in the case of several Protestant denominations, Jehovah's Witnesses, and for other religious groups that do not have a long history in the country.

Respect for religious freedom continued to deteriorate during the period covered by this report. The Government harassed, arrested, and detained members of non-sanctioned Protestant religious groups locally referred to collectively as "Pentes," reform movements from and within the Coptic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and adherents of the Baha'i Faith. There were also numerous reports of forced recantations and physical torture. Only the four government-sanctioned religious groups—Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Catholics, and members of the Evangelical Church of Eritrea (which has affiliation with the Lutheran World Federation)—were allowed to meet freely during the period covered by this report. Following a May 2002 government decree that all religious groups must register or cease all religious activities, all religious facilities not belonging to the four sanctioned religious groups were closed. These closures and the restriction on holding religious meetings continued during 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 are an exception to this general tolerance. There was some societal prejudice against members of the non-sanctioned religious groups including individual cooperation with government authorities to report on and harass those worshipers. There also were reports that some Orthodox Christian priests encouraged harassment of these non-sanctioned religious groups and reported their activities to the Government.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 48,489 square miles, and its population is approximately 3.5 million. Although reliable statistics are not available, approximately 50 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, and approximately 40 percent is Orthodox Christian. The population also includes a small number of Eastern Rite and Roman Catholics (5 percent), Protestants (2 percent), smaller numbers of Seventh-day Adventists, and fewer than 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses. Approximately 2 percent practices traditional indigenous religions. Also present in very small numbers are practicing Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is. The population in the eastern and western lowlands predominantly is Muslim and in the highlands predominantly is Christian. There are very few atheists. Religious participation is high among all ethnic groups.

Within the country's geographic and ethnic groups, the majority of the Tigrinya is Orthodox Christian, with the exception of the Djiberti Tigrinya, who are Muslim. The majority of the Tigre, Saho, Nara, Afar, Rashaida, Beja, and Blen is Muslim. Approximately 40 percent of the Blen is Christian, the majority of whom is Catholic. The majority of the Kunama is Roman Catholic, with a large minority of Muslims and some who practice traditional indigenous religions. The central and southern highland areas, which generally are more economically developed than the lowlands, predominantly are populated by Christian Tigrinyas and some Muslim Djiberti and Saho. The Afar and Rashaida, as well as some of the Saho and Tigre, live in the eastern lowlands. The Blen live on the border between the western lowlands and the central highlands and are concentrated in the Keren area, which also includes a significant minority of Tigre and Tigrinya speakers. The Beja, Kunama, Nara, and the majority of Tigre live in the western lowlands.

Foreign missionaries operate in the country, including representatives of the Catholic, Protestant, and

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

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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

In May 2002, the Minister of Information issued a decree that all religious groups must be registered. Leaders of the non-sanctioned religious groups were warned that, until the registration applications were received and approved, no religious activities or services could be held. Registration requirements include: history of the religious group in the country, explanation of the "uniqueness" or benefit that the group offers compared to other religious groups already in the country, names and personal information of religious leaders, a list of group members, detailed information on assets and property owned by the group, and sources of funding from outside the country. A government committee reviews the applications, which will be approved only if they conform to local culture. The Mehrete Yesus Presbyterian Church, Faith Mission Church, Seventh-day Adventists, and Baha'i Faith each submitted a complete registration application during the period covered by this report. The Kalehiwot, Full Gospel, Mesert Cristos, Tinsai, and Philadelphia churches submitted registration packages that did not include individual member names, while the Rhema Church and two others groups reportedly submitted blank registration forms. No decisions were made by the end of the period covered by this report, despite the fact that several religious groups submitted their registration documents over one year ago and continued to inquire with the relevant government offices. Unofficial comments from senior government officials suggest that groups without significant historical ties to the country will not be licensed to operate.

The four government-sanctioned religious groups—Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Catholics, and members of the Evangelical Church of Eritrea—were not required to register and their services and activities were allowed to continue.

In 1994 in accordance with a presidential decree, the Government revoked the trading licenses of some Jehovah's Witnesses and dismissed most of those who worked in the civil service. This government action resulted in economic, employment, and travel difficulties for many members of Jehovah's Witnesses, especially former civil servants and businessmen.

The Government owns all land, and 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 Government prohibits political activity by religious groups. The Directorate of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Local Government monitors religious compliance with this proscription.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Islam and Christianity are practiced widely and largely are tolerated throughout the country, with persons free to worship at the religious service of their choice; however, in 2001 the Government began closing religious facilities of non-sanctioned religious groups—those not belonging to the four principal religions in the country. Following the May 2002 government decree that all religious groups must register or cease all religious activities, religious facilities not belonging to the four sanctioned religious groups were closed. Authorities also informed non-sanctioned religious groups that a standing law would be used to stop political or other gatherings in private homes of more than three or five persons. Authorities enforced this law during the period covered by this report.

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

The Government denied visa applications by representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups 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. 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 Roman Catholic Church and Muslim organizations were required to pay a rehabilitation tax to recover properties that were expropriated by the previous regime; however, this tax was not enforced as rigorously against Orthodox Church properties.

The military has no chaplains. Military personnel are free to worship at nearby houses of worship for the four sanctioned religions.

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

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were numerous credible reports that over 300 followers of various non-sanctioned religious groups were detained or harassed. These reports came from foreign media, human rights groups, individual religious leaders and members, and their families. Government officials declined to comment on specific details of reported abuses.

For example, on January 1, 50 members of the Rhema Church in Asmara were detained for 10 days without charge. On February 16, an additional 17 Rhema Church members were detained for 15 days after meeting in a private residence; some of the members reportedly were beaten while in detention.

On March 16, more than 70 members of different Protestant churches (Rhema, Full Gospel, Kalehiwot, and Mesert Cristos churches) in Asmara were detained for 10 days. This group reportedly was held in a metal shipping container without ventilation or sanitation facilities.

On March 23, 40 members of the Philadelphia Church in Asmara were detained for 8 days, and some reportedly were subjected to physical torture and pressured to recant their faith. The pastor and other church leaders who went to inquire on their behalf also were detained. Members reported that their pastor was forced to walk barefoot over sharp stones. After 8 days, relatives were forced to sign papers stating that those detained would not attend church services or meet in their homes with other church members.

On April 16, approximately 160 Jehovah's Witnesses were detained while meeting in a private home in Asmara. Most were released within a week, but 5 who apparently were considered "elders" were detained for 28 days.

On April 17, 15 members of a splinter group of the Orthodox Church in Kushte were attacked while meeting in a private residence. A few of the members were admitted to the hospital for treatment as a result of the attacks. On the same day in Asmara, 11 members of the Mesert Cristos Church were arrested while meeting at their church building and detained for 1 day.

Over the Orthodox Easter weekend, two members of the government-sanctioned Evangelical Church were arrested and detained for 3 days. The two young men were singing traditional Easter songs in the streets, which reportedly offended a police officer.

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

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

Although members of other religious groups, including Muslims, reportedly have been punished in past years for failure to participate in national service, the Government has singled out Jehovah's Witnesses who were conscientious objectors for harsher treatment than that received by followers of other faiths for

similar actions. Only Jehovah's Witnesses who did not participate in national service have been subject to dismissal from the civil service, revocation of their trading licenses, eviction from government-owned housing, and denial of passports, identity cards, and exit visas.

At the end of the period covered by this report, 11 Jehovah's Witnesses remained in detention without charge and without being tried for failing to participate in national service. These individuals have been detained for varying periods, some for more than 8 years. The maximum penalty for refusing to perform national service is 3 years. Ministry of Justice officials have denied that any Jehovah's Witnesses were in detention without charge, although they acknowledge that some Jehovah's Witnesses and a number of Muslims were jailed for evading national service. There were no reports that Jehovah's Witnesses who performed national service and participated in the national independence referendum were subject to discrimination.

The army resorted to various forms of extreme physical punishment to force objectors, including some Jehovah's Witnesses, to perform military service.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were reports that police forced some adherents of non-sanctioned (mostly Protestant) religious groups to sign statements that they would abandon their faith and return to the Orthodox Christian 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.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

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

Societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses are an exception to this general religious tolerance. Jehovah's Witnesses generally are disliked and face some societal discrimination because of their refusal to participate in the 1993 independence referendum and to perform national service, a refusal that is seen widely as unpatriotic. There was some social prejudice against members of the non-sanctioned religious groups including individual cooperation with government authorities to report on and harass those members. There also were reports that some Orthodox Christian priests encouraged harassment of these non-sanctioned religious groups and reported their activities to the Government.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The U.S. Embassy meets regularly with leaders of the religious community, but has been unsuccessful at arranging meetings with the Government's Director of Religious Affairs.

The U.S. Ambassador and other Embassy officers have raised the cases of detentions and restrictions on non-sanctioned religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, with government officials in the President's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the High Court, the Ministry of Justice, and in media interviews.

Released on December 18, 2003

International Religious Freedom Report Home Page

