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KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea remained extremely poor. The government did not register any new religious organizations, and individuals practicing faiths other than the four officially recognized by the government faced intimidation and prosecution by Eritrean authorities. Members of officially recognized religions also faced restrictions and government backlash for practicing their faith. Dozens of religious prisoners of conscience remain imprisoned in decrepit, unsanitary, and inhumane conditions.

Eritrean authorities continued to detain dozens of people imprisoned for their religious belief or practice. The government detained 20 Jehovah’s Witnesses for conscientious objection to military service and other expressions of their faith.

In February, [Patriarch Abune Antonios](#), the former leader of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, [died](#) at age 94 after spending a decade and a half under house arrest because of his religious beliefs, his calls for the release of political prisoners, and his resistance to government pressure to excommunicate members of the church.

In October, security forces [detained three Catholic leaders](#) for two months for raising Eritrea’s human rights violations in their sermons. Prison conditions are abysmal, with detainees living in squalor and subject to violence and intimidation.

Eritrean forces have also continued to engage militarily in the Tigray region of neighboring Ethiopia, where ethnically affiliated rebel fighters seek respect for autonomous local governance. In past years, Eritrean troops operating in support of the Ethiopian government in the region have [attacked religious sites](#) and [triggered](#) community-based [religious violence](#) in some areas. Reports suggest that in 2022, Eritrean forces in Ethiopia [continued to commit](#) human rights abuses and [undermine the peace process](#), exacerbating the likelihood that instability could yield additional religious freedom violations in Ethiopia.

The Tigrayan crisis has also impacted Eritrean refugees living in Ethiopia, some of whom fled Eritrea’s repressive religious and human rights policies. Violence from both sides in the conflict has destabilized the Tigray region, causing some Eritrean refugees to [flee back across the border](#) to their country of origin or face violence and [abuses](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Eritrea as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations as the presidential action imposed as a consequence of the CPC designation to encourage religious freedom improvements;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government agencies and officials

responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;

- Engage with the Eritrean government to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities, grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah’s Witnesses, and release the remaining detainees held on account of their religious activities; and
- Coordinate an initiative through the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) to encourage the

Eritrean government to extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Highlight religious freedom issues in Eritrea through legislation, hearings and briefings, and a congressional delegation trip to Eritrea to engage with Eritrean officials to encourage them to advance human rights and religious freedom.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Religious Freedom Concerns in the Horn of Africa](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Overview of Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution Globally](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Mourns the Passing of Patriarch Abune Antonios](#)

Background

Following military conflict with and secession from neighboring Ethiopia, Eritrea [gained independence](#) in 1993. With a [population](#) of just over six million people, Eritrea's [religious demography](#) is difficult to assess. The government recognizes three Christian denominations—Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—estimated to comprise between 49 and 63 percent of the population. It also recognizes Islam, estimated to comprise between 37 and 49 percent of the population. Minority communities [adhere](#) to the Baha'i, Jewish, and traditional animist faiths.

The [Eritrean constitution](#) protects citizens' rights to freedom of religion or belief. The law and constitution prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the freedom to practice any religion and to change one's religion. However, the government regularly violates these rights in practice. [Proclamation No. 73](#) of 1995 permits the government to exert full control over religious activities in the country. The government of Eritrea requires all religious groups to apply for registration, with only the four approved communities allowed to operate since 2002. Applications from other faith communities have been denied for being "defective," according to the Office of Religious Affairs. Without formal registration, faith groups' rights are denied and they are prohibited from building or owning houses of worship or engaging in religious practices such as praying in groups.

Eritrean authorities [signed](#) the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship with neighboring Ethiopia in July 2018. The accord ended over two decades of war between the two countries. Following the peace treaty, President Isaias Afwerki delivered a much anticipated [speech](#) on Independence Day, saying "the beginning of a new era" had come to Eritrea. Historically, Eritrea justified its [oppression](#) of political and civil rights by citing security concerns related to the ongoing war with Ethiopia. Many observers anticipated that the President's commitment would translate into advancements for human rights, including religious freedom. However, nearly five years after the agreement, over a thousand political [prisoners](#), including many imprisoned for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, remain behind bars.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

In February 2022, [Patriarch Abune Antonios](#), the former leader of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, [died at age 94](#) after spending a decade and a half under house arrest because of his religious beliefs and advocacy. Patriarch Antonios had been imprisoned for over a decade after condemning government interference in church affairs and calling for the release of imprisoned Christians. In 2006, Eritrean authorities removed him from his position as the ordained head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and placed him under house arrest. A year later, he was forcibly disappeared from his residence and taken to an undisclosed location. He was reportedly denied proper medical care throughout his custody.

In October, security forces detained [Catholic leaders](#) Bishop Fikremariam Hagos Tsalm, Father Mihretab Stefanos, and Friar Abbot Abraham at the airport in Asmara as they returned from traveling in Europe. The government did not publicize charges against Tsalm and

his colleagues, but sources from the ground report that they were targeted for publicly highlighting human rights violations in Eritrea in their homilies. Authorities held them in detention for two months before [releasing them](#) on December 29.

The Eritrean government continued to imprison 20 Jehovah's Witnesses: 14 men and six women. These religious prisoners include an 80-year-old man and two men who have been in prison for more than 17 years without formal charges against them. Eritrean officials reportedly refused to meet with representatives of the Jehovah's Witness community to discuss these violations.

Conditions for religious prisoners of conscience in Eritrea are particularly poor. First-hand accounts describe physical abuse, sexual violence, and torture as normal and ongoing practices. Prisoners are often denied medical treatment, and many have died in prison due to severe human rights abuses. Many prisons reportedly use metal shipping containers to hold large numbers of people. In prison, praying aloud, singing, preaching, and possessing religious books are banned. Arrested individuals have reported being asked to sign documents certifying that they renounce their faith or that they join or return to the Eritrean Orthodox Church; if they do not, they face transfer to worse conditions.

Cross-Border Military Activity

In 2022, Eritrean forces [continued to engage](#) militarily in neighboring northern Ethiopia, where their activities have historically included attacks [on religious infrastructure](#). This conflict has also aggravated religious freedom challenges in Eritrea itself. The Eritrean government has reportedly increased conscription to meet the demand for military support in Tigray, raising the risk of prosecution against conscientious objectors. Eritrean refugees who fled to Ethiopia to avoid restrictive Eritrean government policies, including religious restrictions, have been [detained](#) and forcibly returned to Eritrea in the context of the Tigray conflict. Targeted violence by the Tigray People's Liberation Front has also [impacted Eritrean refugees](#), likely including those fleeing religious persecution.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States has extremely limited diplomatic relations with [Eritrea](#). Diplomats continued to raise issues of human rights and religious freedom in official conversations with representatives from the Eritrean government. Due to religious freedom violations and other human rights abuses, the Joseph R. Biden administration declined to invite Eritrean government leaders to the high-profile U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit held in December in Washington, DC.

On November 30, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Eritrea as a CPC for engaging in and tolerating particularly severe violations of international religious freedom. In 2022, the United States [renewed](#) sanctions [imposed in 2021](#) under Executive Order (E.O.) 13818 (which builds upon and implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act) and E.O. 14046 (Imposing Sanctions on Certain Persons with Respect to the Humanitarian and Human Rights Crisis in Ethiopia) against Eritrean entities and individuals perpetuating the crisis in Ethiopia.