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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ethiopia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The country is a secular state; the constitution requires the separation of religion and the state, establishes freedom of religious choice and practice, prohibits religious discrimination, and stipulates the government shall not interfere in the practice of any religion, nor shall any religion interfere in the affairs of the state.

In February, Oromia regional security forces shot and killed a number of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) parishioners in a church in Shashemene town. According to the EOTC Secretariat, security forces shot the parishioners as they were trying to prevent the church from being seized by members of a splinter group, the Holy Synod of Oromia Nations and Nationalities (HSONN), which broke away from the EOTC in January. Investigators from the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) confirmed that eight individuals were killed in the shooting and determined police used “excessive force.” In February, Reuters reported Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed negotiated a settlement between the EOTC and HSONN. Multiple government agencies suspended employees who dressed in black January 6-8 following the EOTC’s call to wear black for the Nineveh fast. In May, the Oromia regional government reportedly demolished approximately 20 mosques in addition to numerous residences in the newly established Sheger City that it considered illegal constructions. The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) stated it had appealed to Prime Minister Abiy after the Oromia regional government failed to hear its grievances and continued with the demolitions. Protests against the mosque demolitions erupted following Friday prayer at Anwar Grand Mosque in Addis Ababa. The EHRC reported government security forces repeatedly used excessive force, resulting in civilian injuries and fatalities. According to Mahibere Kidusan, a church organization affiliated with the EOTC, unidentified individuals stoned to death an EOTC priest on the outskirts of Addis Ababa in March. Mahibere Kidusan said government security forces seized and deleted contents from the mobile devices of individuals who recorded the killing. In March, Addis Ababa police reportedly disrupted a religious service at St. George Ethiopian Orthodox church, near Menelik II Square, after an Adwa Day celebration led to a confrontation between police and youths. The EHRC said security forces overreacted and used excessive measures.

There were several reported cases of armed groups and government forces attacking religious centers and churches. Eyewitnesses told media sources that the majority of the people who sheltered in the Holy Trinity Monastery of the EOTC were killed, injured, or displaced following the national army’s crackdown “against [the] Fano militia.” Media outlet *Deutsche Welle (DW) Amharic*, broadcasting from Germany, reported a similar incident in which the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) killed four persons and abducted two civilians in an attack on an EOTC church in the Tiyo district in Oromia Region.

In September, *VOA Amharic* reported an inter-religious conflict between Muslim youths and Orthodox Christians resulted in the burning of houses and businesses in the Central Ethiopia Region and the displacement of approximately 1,000 Orthodox Christians who had to shelter in the same region. There were reports that members of the OLA burned Protestant churches in the western part of Oromia Region and killed members of the Evangelical Mekane Yesus Church (EECMY). In July, the EOTC made efforts to reconcile the schism with the Tigrayan Orthodox Tewahedo Church (TOTC) but were unsuccessful. Ethiopian Jews said they often faced social exclusion from local communities and were accused of practicing witchcraft to bring harm to non-Jews.

In April, the U.S. Chargé held an interfaith iftar at her residence with then EIASC Vice President Sheikh Abdulaziz Abdulwali and invited representatives from diverse faiths. She affirmed the U.S. government's commitment to "creating bridges of understanding and respect that will bring people of all faiths together to build stronger bonds and cooperation." In January, the Chargé and another embassy officer visited Lalibela to celebrate *Timket*, an EOTC epiphany celebration, to underscore U.S. government support for religious tolerance. Throughout September and October, embassy officers met with representatives from diverse faiths to discuss how to best address religious unrest and religious freedom following the year's events.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 115.8 million (midyear 2023). According to the Ethiopian government's 2007 census, the most recent available, 44 percent of the population follows the EOTC, 34 percent are Sunni Muslim, and 19 percent belong to evangelical Christian and Pentecostal groups, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ethiopian Kale Hiwot Church, and the EECMY. Many observers believe the Muslim, evangelical Christian and Pentecostal proportions of the population have increased since the last national census was conducted in 2007. A majority of individuals in Tigray are adherents of the TOTC or the EOTC. Most Amhara residents are adherents of the EOTC, while Islam is most prevalent in Afar, Somali, and parts of Oromia Regions. Protestant churches have the most adherents in Gambella Region, the former Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region, and in parts of Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz Regions.

Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Eastern Rite and Roman Catholics, Greek and Russian Orthodox, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and practitioners of Indigenous religions. The largest concentration of Roman Catholics is in Tigray, representing approximately 0.4 percent of Tigray's population, according to the 2007 census. Waaqeffanna – a monotheist Indigenous religion in Oromia Region – reportedly continued to grow (estimates are unclear and range from 300,000 to over a million adherents) on university campuses and among the Oromo community; its belief system is unique to the Oromo culture. The Rastafarian community numbers approximately 1,000 individuals, and its members primarily reside in Addis Ababa and the town of Shashemene in Oromia Region. Rastafarianism has roots in the EOTC and uses the EOTC Bible.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution requires the separation of state and religion, establishes freedom of religious choice and practice, prohibits religious discrimination, and stipulates the government shall not interfere in the practice of any religion, nor shall religion interfere in state affairs. It permits limitations on religious freedom as prescribed by law to protect public safety, education, and morals as well as to guarantee the independence of government from religion. The law criminalizes religious defamation and incitement of one religious group against another.

The law permits sharia courts to adjudicate personal status cases, provided both parties are Muslim and consent to the court's jurisdiction.

Registration and licensing of religious groups fall under the mandate of the Directorate of Faith and Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Peace, which requires unregistered religious groups to submit a founding document, the national identity cards of its founders, and the permanent address of the religious institution and planned regional branches. The registration process also requires an application letter, information on board members, meeting minutes, information on the founders, financial reports, offices, name, and symbols. Religious groups must have at least 1,000 members to register as a religious entity and 500 for registration as a ministry or association; the rights and privileges are the same for each category. During the registration process, the government publishes the religious group's name and logo in a local newspaper. If there are no objections within 20 working days, registration is granted. Registration with the ministry confers legal status on a religious group, which gives the group the right to congregate and to obtain land to build a place of worship and establish a cemetery. Unregistered groups do not receive these benefits.

Religious groups must renew their registration at least once every five years; failure to do so may result in a fine. Unlike other religious groups, the EOTC is not registered by the Ministry of Peace but obtains registration through a provision in the civil code passed in 1960 during the imperial era that is still in force.

Registered religious organizations are required to provide annual activity and financial reports. Registered umbrella associations, such as the EOTC and the EIASC, are granted special privileges, with auditing only required every three to five years. Activity reports must describe proselytizing activities and list new members, newly ordained clergy, and new houses of worship.

Under the constitution, the federal government owns all land; religious groups must apply to both the regional and local governments for land allocation, including for land to build places of worship. While the federal government grants the land, religious groups pay an annual tax to the local government. The tax is determined by the total area of the land and the local tax rates that may differ from zone to zone. If there is a dispute between the religious organization and the local government on the land they are allocated, or not allocated, the federal government steps in as an intermediary.

Government policy prohibits the holding of religious services inside public institutions, in accordance with the constitutionally required separation of religion and state. The federal government also mandates public institutions take a two-hour break from work on Fridays to allow Muslim workers to attend prayers. Private companies are not required to follow this policy.

The constitution prohibits religious instruction and prayer in public and private nonreligious schools, although both public and private schools may organize clubs based on shared religious values. The law permits the establishment of a separate category of religious schools under the auspices of churches and mosques. The Charities and Societies Agency, a government body accountable to the federal attorney general, and the Ministry of Education regulate religious schools, which provide both secular and religious instruction. The Ministry of Education oversees the secular component of education provided by religious schools.

The law prohibits the formation of political parties based on religion but allows civil society organizations and religious groups to engage in advocacy and lobbying activities and to collect and obtain funding from any legal source. Religious groups undertaking development activities are required to register their development arms as charities with the Charities and Societies Agency and to follow legal guidelines originating from the Charities and Societies Proclamation.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

In January, three archbishops from the EOTC ordained 27 bishops without the approval of the EOTC Holy Synod and announced the formation of the HSONN, an entity independent from the EOTC. Representatives of the HSONN cited various grievances for the split, including what they

characterized as a widespread inability of Oromos to worship in their native language in EOTC services, a claim which EOTC leadership disputes. According to the EHRC, the HSONN appropriated EOTC churches in Oromia Region without EOTC permission. The EOTC excommunicated all HSONN members, said the federal government supported members of the HSONN, and threatened to organize nationwide demonstrations in response to perceived government engagement in religious affairs. On February 4, Oromia regional security forces reportedly shot and killed many EOTC worshippers in Saint Michael Church of Shashemene town in Oromia Region. According to EOTC Secretariat Abune Petros, the security forces shot the parishioners as they tried to prevent HSONN members from seizing the church. On February 10, the EHRC said police killed eight individuals in Shashemene and used “excessive force” during the incident. It also accused government officials of helping the HSONN appropriate EOTC churches.

On February 8, the government’s Joint Security and Intelligence Task Force issued a statement cautioning both groups – the EOTC and HSONN – to refrain from calling for unauthorized demonstrations throughout the country, which would incite unrest. The government also announced it had started law enforcement operations against a covert group known as the Organizers of Martyrdom Rally. The government accused the group, which included businessmen, youth associations, and opposition politicians, of plotting “to take the opportunity [the schism within the EOTC] to shake the government with armed violence.”

The EOTC rejected the government’s warning and in a statement, announced it would go forward with the February 12 nationwide demonstration unless the government “stops violating the law in cooperation with the illegal individuals [ex-communicated archbishops], exit[s] from the premises of churches it forcefully took over, release[s] detained followers and clergy members, respect[s] the legal structures of the church, and send[s] a public apology in the next two days.” The statement further added that holding a peaceful demonstration was an internationally recognized human right and “is stipulated in Article 30 of the constitution.”

On February 11, the Federal High Court of Lideta issued a temporary injunction prohibiting HSONN members, the Oromia regional government, federal police, and Oromia regional police from occupying EOTC churches. Following an agreement among the parties, the court lifted the injunction against the leaders of HSONN on February 24, while maintaining the injunction against 25 monks whom the leaders had ordained. Despite the injunction, several media outlets reported groups affiliated with the HSONN continued to use EOTC churches. According to a member of the EOTC legal team, the Oromia regional police reportedly assisted HSONN members to seize a church in Assela town. The Oromia regional police, reportedly in support of HSONN, continued to detain EOTC clergy despite the EOTC’s agreement with Oromia’s regional president, Shimelis Abdisa, to respect the law.

On February 2, Fentahun Muchie, a member of EOTC leadership, criticized Prime Minister Abiy’s January 31 explanation of the EOTC schism that equated the EOTC leadership and the HSONN saying “both parties have truth” to their respective cause. In an interview with EOTC TV, Fentahun said “the government gave a [sic] recognition to a coup against the church leadership...” He denounced what he called “a [sic] tactical support” that government security forces provided to the splinter group. On April 21, social media reported the government barred Fentahun from departing the country for the inauguration of an EOTC monastery in California. Police reportedly detained Fentahun and released him later the same day.

On February 16, media sources reported Prime Minister Abiy negotiated a settlement between the EOTC and the HSONN. Some of the points of the agreement included restoring the original three archbishops to their positions, expanding church services in the Afaan Oromoo language, considering appointing additional archbishops from among the 25 HSONN ordained monks and expanding Oromo representation within the church. The EOTC subsequently announced it suspended the nationwide demonstration; some HSONN members, however, alleged the EOTC did not meet all of its agreements. On February 13, federal police arrested 12 individuals affiliated with the EOTC. They released seven of the individuals but asked the court to allow them to detain the remaining five for an additional eight days to investigate suspicions that the individuals committed “an act of terrorism and an attempt of overthrowing the government.” These latest arrests were in

addition to 200 EOTC-affiliated individuals whom police had previously detained. The EOTC's Holy Synod General Secretary and Archbishop of New York Diocese Abune Petros told *DW Amharic* on February 13, "The signs we are seeing are not hopeful, and the government is not doing what we expect it to do after our agreement on February 10." He said government action and police accusations against the arrested EOTC members might derail the anticipated settlement between the EOTC and HSONN. On February 17, an EOTC affiliated television channel reported Oromia regional police released an additional 150 EOTC members after Petros consulted with police and the regional government attorneys representing the Oromia Region.

Despite the settlement between the EOTC and HSONN and the postponement of the religious leaders' planned rally, the government reportedly continued its crack down and harassment of EOTC churchgoers. On February 6, the Ethiopia Peace Observatory, an initiative to enhance data collection across the country, reported Oromia Region special forces and police officers beat Orthodox Christians who were wearing black during the Nineveh fast. Although they usually wore white during fasting, the EOTC followers wore black to protest the HSONN schism at the request of the local Orthodox Church synod in Bule Hora and Adama towns in Oromia Region. On February 14, digital news source Addis Zeybe reported security forces in Addis Ababa and Oromia Region arrested an unknown number of EOTC churchgoers between February 10 and 12, despite the federal government's promise to agree to the EOTC's demands, including releasing previously arrested EOTC members. Also on February 12, EOTC television reported security forces prevented churchgoers from entering several EOTC churches in parts of Addis Ababa for Sunday services. Security forces closed the city center to pedestrians and vehicles because it was conducting a security drill in preparation for the African Union Summit, which took place from January 16-February 19.

According to digital media platform Addis Insight, the Addis Ababa City Administration suspended employees who dressed in black on January 6-8 following the EOTC request. The City Administration suspended employees for "an act of involvement outside of public duty." Additionally, the online news site Addis Maleda reported on March 29 that the Oromia Region Women and Children Affairs Bureau took similar "administrative measures" against EOTC followers who wore black during the Nineveh fasting period. Media sources reported the bureau decided to transfer and demote four employees and fired two for "misconduct."

In May, the Oromia regional government reportedly demolished approximately 20 mosques in addition to numerous residences in the newly established Sheger City that it considered illegal constructions. The Muslim community protested the demolitions. The EIASC stated it had appealed to Prime Minister Abiy after the Oromia regional government failed to hear its grievances and continued with the demolitions. On May 18, EIASC released on social media a letter that it had written to the Prime Minister protesting the mosque demolitions. In the letter, the council said it would not regard "the demolition of mosques lightly despite the town administration's claim" of the illegality of their construction, and mosques are "core to the existence of the Muslim community." On May 26 and June 2, protests against the mosque demolitions erupted at Anwar Grand Mosque in Addis Ababa following Friday prayers. As the protesters clashed with security forces, police reportedly fired live bullets into the crowd, resulting in four civilian fatalities and approximately 40 injuries that included civilians and police.

Addis Ababa police and the Ethiopian Joint Intelligence and Security Taskforce reported [52](#) and [63](#) police officers were injured on May 26 and June 2, respectively. On June 3, thousands of Muslims attended the funeral of four community members that security forces killed; three died on June 2, and one died due to an injury sustained during the May 26 protests. The EHRC, in its June 1 statement, reported government security forces had repeatedly used excessive force, resulting in the injury and death of civilians. The EHRC said that following the May 26 incident at Grand Anwar Mosque in Addis Ababa, police arrested more than 140 individuals, stating they had participated in violent demonstrations. In a May 31 statement, the Oromia regional government defended the demolition of mosques as constitutional and legal and reported demolitions of illegal structures were not limited to Sheger City but occurred in 600 towns across Oromia Region.

On June 8, the EIASC said it had reached a settlement with the Oromia regional government to provide replacement land for the demolished mosques in Sheger City. In a media briefing, following a consultation with Oromia Regional President Shimelis Abdisa, EIASC President Haji Ibrahim Tufa stated the EIASC and the government had reached consensus that government agencies would consult religious communities before demolishing illegally built religious centers in different areas of the region. The EIASC said it regretted the unwillingness of the Oromia regional government to consult until June 7, resulting in heightened hostility from the Muslim community toward the government, which was the catalyst for the ensuing violence in which security forces killed civilians. According to an EIASC statement, Oromia Region officials planned to demolish 656 religious centers out of the 800 in Sheger City after stating the religious centers were “incompatible with the City Masterplan.”

There were several reports that armed groups, including government forces, attacked religious centers and churches. In May, eyewitnesses in Debre Elias District of the East Gojjam Zone in Amhara Region told media sources that 95 percent of the 600 individuals sheltered in the Holy Trinity Monastery of the Orthodox church were killed, injured, or displaced following the national army’s crackdown “against the Fano militia.” On May 31, *DW Amharic* interviewed eyewitnesses and doctors who said the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) shelled the monastery for five consecutive days, alleging it harbored members of the Fano militia. In the aftermath of the attack, a doctor working in the area told *DW Amharic* that injured members of the community did not seek medical treatment in health centers. He also reported treating more than 200 members of the ENDF for injuries in the medical center where he was employed. *DW Amharic* reported an incident in which the OLA killed four persons and abducted two civilians during its May 28 attack on an EOTC church in the Tiyo district of the Arsi Zone in Oromia Region. On March 24, *Borkena*, a diaspora-based media outlet, reported an incident where an EOTC priest was stoned to death on the outskirts of Addis Ababa by unidentified individuals. A representative from Mahibere Kidusan confirmed the incident and identified the victim as Kesis Abay Melese and said government security forces in the area seized and deleted contents from the mobile devices of individuals who recorded the event.

On August 5, the EIASC called for peace in the Amhara Region following the escalation of conflicts since April and the subsequent declaration of a state of emergency on August 4. In a statement, the EIASC called on all parties “to learn from the past and solve problems with dialogue.” The EIASC reminded everyone of the destructive impact of war and offered to do “anything necessary” for the success of a prospective dialogue to avoid a conflict. On August 7, *VOA Amharic* interviewed a Fano leader in Gondar, who said government actions and interference undermined Orthodox Christian and Islamic religious institutions and contributed to public grievance in Amhara and led to the ongoing conflict between the Fano militia and the ENDF.

On December 28, Reuters reported an aerial strike on the grounds of a church in Oromia Region that killed eight persons and injured five as they collected corn. Government spokesperson Legesse Tulu dismissed the accounts as “an absolute lie.”

On August 31, the monthly magazine *Addis Standard* reported Oromia regional police arrested and later released seven Orthodox bishops of the HSONN in Bishoftu City. Prior to their release, the *Addis Standard* interviewed Hailemichael Tadesse, spokesperson for the HSONN, who said that on August 21, police detained the seven because they did not join the reconciliation process with the EOTC.

On March 2, according to the *Addis Standard*, police in Addis Ababa forcefully disrupted a religious service at St. George church, near Menelik II Square, after an Adwa Day (national holiday to celebrate Ethiopia’s 1896 victory against Italy) celebration led to a confrontation between police and youths. In a statement on March 3, the EOTC Addis Ababa Diocese said police forcefully disrupted worship services by throwing tear gas into the premises of the church, which injured many of the attendees. The head of the EOTC Addis Diocese, Abune Henok, rejected the March 2 Government Communication Service statement that blamed an “unknown group” for trying to disrupt the church service and said measures taken by security forces had reduced the possible damage. The EHRC said security forces “overreacted” and needlessly assaulted people, used tear

gas, plastic and lethal bullets, and other excessive measures. The security forces injured older persons and children and killed at least one civilian, according to the EHRC.

On October 6, the Dire Dawa City Administration notified the EECMY of its decision to relocate the church within one month to make way for construction of a five-star hotel project. In an October 31 statement, the Mekane Yesus Central Office protested the decision saying, “The decision...has shocked not only the faithful but all the public.” The Central Office also said the church leadership was in consultation with the city administration to reconsider the decision.

The government continued to issue residency status and identity cards to largely stateless Rastafarians, individuals who moved to Ethiopia from other countries during the government of Haile Selassie and their descendants.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the EHRC stated violence intensified during the year, especially in April after the federal government began to integrate regional security forces in Amhara and unrest in Oromia Region and elsewhere persisted. Because ethnicity and religion are closely linked and because criminality, politics, access to resources, and historical grievances were also drivers of violence in the country, it was often difficult to determine whether some incidents were based on religion, other factors, or a combination thereof.

In September, *VOA Amharic* reported an inter-religious conflict involving the burning of approximately 100 houses and businesses in Kibet town of Silte Zone in the Central Ethiopia Region, which led to the displacement of residents and business owners. *DW Amharic* interviewed residents of Kibet town, who said the conflict started on September 4 as a disagreement between police and a Muslim youth group that used voice amplifiers to read verses from the Quran to “relieve women who were allegedly paralyzed by witchcraft.”

On September 14, *VOA Amharic* reported EIASC leaders in the Central Ethiopia Region worked to reconcile the Muslim and Orthodox communities, and to assist the return of the approximately 1,000 Orthodox Christian internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had been uprooted from Kibet town due to the September 4 conflagration. In the aftermath, the IDPs had been sheltering in Butajira town. The IDPs demanded accountability from “those who initiated the attack targeting Orthodox Christians” and sought humanitarian assistance. The EOTC representative in the Silte Zone said the homes that were burned during the conflict needed to be rebuilt in order for the IDPs to return, and “[the] government, not community leaders” needed to ensure that violence did not reoccur. In October, the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) sent a delegation to visit victims of the September 4 violent incident. During the visit, the delegation interviewed local residents, religious leaders, and IDPs. According to the IRCE Secretary-General, the IRCE delegation said the perpetrators should be held accountable, the IDPs should be able to return to their villages, and the government should guarantee their safety.

During the year, there were reports that members of the OLA burned Protestant and EECMY churches in the Western part of Oromia Region and killed members of EECMY.

In February, the *Addis Standard* reported the EOTC’s effort to restore its severed relations with Orthodox churches and leadership in Tigray, who in 2021 announced the formation of the TOTC. According to the *Addis Standard*, the EOTC sent a letter to the Tigray-based Orthodox stating, “Politicians shouldn’t separate the Ethiopian Orthodox Church from the Tigray people, the source of the religion and its doctrine. As a result, it is necessary to leave behind the mistakes committed in the past and serve our people and our church as before.” In a statement on February 9, the TOTC declined to restore relations, saying that all “Tigray received was rhetoric of toxic hate speech that

aggravated the war, acts that saw the burning of Tigrayan civilians, rhetoric advocating for the erasure of Tigrayans from history and people's conscience, and speeches from bishops who chose Satan over people." On May 6, the EOTC sent an official apology to the Tigray-based Orthodox churches and followers for its failure to plead "to end the war on time," referring to the 2020-22 northern conflict, and for failing to be physically present in Tigray during the war to "comfort the entire people of Tigray, bishops and church leaders."

In July, EOTC Patriarch Abune Mathias led a delegation to Tigray in an effort to restore relations between the EOTC and TOTC. According to a media report, the Patriarch said the "scourge" against the people of Tigray was unseen before and he pleaded for reconciliation. According to a media report, the EOTC delegation returned to Addis Ababa without securing a face-to-face meeting with the leaders of the TOTC. On July 12, TOTC leaders announced a plan to appoint archbishops for the dioceses that they had formed; a plan the EOTC opposed. On July 17, the TOTC selected archbishops who were later ordained.

On August 1, the Holy Synod of the EOTC excommunicated four Tigray-based Orthodox archbishops and nine monks leading the separatist TOTC. In response, the TOTC rejected the August 1 excommunication of its leaders saying, "no one can excommunicate us as we are the founders of the Orthodox church." In a press briefing to the Tigray regional media, the TOTC archbishops said the EOTC had "financially and morally supported a war in Tigray," and therefore lacked the moral and legal authority to condemn the TOTC. Additionally, the archbishops vowed to continue ordaining new bishops when necessary and advised the EOTC to reconsider the excommunication if it wanted to build a "good neighborhood." They threatened to counter it with a "heavier response" if the EOTC failed to lift the excommunication by year's end. At year's end, the EOTC did not lift the excommunication and TOTC remained an independent church.

Waaqeffanna – an Indigenous religion in Oromia Region unique to Oromo culture – reportedly continued to grow on university campuses and among the Oromo population. Some sources said Oromo police targeted and accused Waaqeffanna adherents of associating with the outlawed Oromo Liberation Army insurgent group.

Ethiopian Jews, known within the country as Beta Israel, reportedly continued to attempt to migrate to Israel with the help of international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and charities during the year. Primarily living in Amhara and Gondar, isolated Beta Israel communities also lived in Kechene and Addis Ababa. According to representatives from the Jewish community, throughout the year hundreds of Jews fled conflicts in multiple parts of the country, arriving in Debre Birhan and other Jewish communities as IDPs. While legally free to practice their form of Judaism, which, depending on the community, can differ from modern Judaic practice, the Beta Israel community reported it has often faced social exclusion from local communities. The group also said they were accused of practicing witchcraft to bring harm to non-Jewish members of the community and were ostracized by local communities where people often believed Jews were possessed by demons or became hyenas at night.

In July, media outlets reported the Beta Israel community in the Amhara region of North Shewa launched a project in conjunction with Israeli and American Jewish NGOs to relocate community members to Debre Birhan town. On June 7, *DW Amharic* interviewed the coordinator of the project, Aklilu Tefera, who said the newly planned village would not only bring people together but also build facilities like hospitals, schools, and community centers aimed at serving both the Jewish community and members and residents of the town of Debre Birhan.

The IRCE continued to include representatives from the EOTC, EIASC, Roman Catholic Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and several evangelical Christian groups, such as the EECMY and the Ethiopian Kale Hiwot Church. IRCE and its branch offices in different parts of the country worked to build relations in conflict-affected areas, including in Silte Zone of the Central Ethiopia Region.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On April 6, the Chargé held an interfaith iftar at her residence with then EIASC Vice President Sheik Abdulaziz Abdulwali. Representatives from the EIASC, EOTC, and Ethiopian Evangelical Council, the Roman Catholic Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the Chabad Synagogue attended. The Chargé affirmed the U.S. government's commitment to "creating bridges of understanding and respect that will bring people of all faiths together to build stronger bonds and cooperation."

In January, the Chargé and another embassy officer led a visit to Lalibela to celebrate Timket to underscore U.S. support for religious freedom. They carried out the visit in coordination with the U.S. Mission to the African Union.

Throughout September and October, embassy officers met with representatives from the IRCE, EOTC, EIASC, EECMY, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ethiopian Jewish Community, Greek Orthodox Church, and the Church of Jesus Christ to discuss how to best address religious strife and tolerance following the year's events.