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U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Eritrea

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Government severely restricts freedom of religion for groups that it has not registered and infringes upon the independence of some registered groups. The 1997 Constitution provides for religious freedom; however, the Constitution has not been implemented. Following a 2002 government decree that religious groups must register, the Government closed all religious facilities not belonging to the country's four principal religious groups--the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea, Islam, and the Roman Catholic Church. The membership of these four religious groups comprises a significant majority of the population.

During the reporting period, the Government's record on religious freedom further deteriorated. The Government continued to harass, arrest, and detain members of independent evangelical groups, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and a reform movement within the Eritrean Orthodox Church and sought greater control over the four approved religious groups. The Government continued its intervention in procedural and administrative decisions of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. The Government failed to register any of the four religious groups who applied in 2002 for registration, and it restricted religious meetings and arrested individuals during religious ceremonies, gatherings, and prayer meetings. There were also reports of forced recantations. There were reports of torture of religious detainees during the reporting period, and some religious detainees were held in harsh conditions that included extreme temperature fluctuations with limited or no access to family.

Citizens generally were tolerant of one another in the practice of their religion, with the exception of societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal groups. The Government requires citizens to perform national service in the military or face incarceration, but it had no programs for alternative national service that would permit Jehovah's Witnesses and others whose faith precludes military service to satisfy the requirement. Some individuals who viewed failure to perform military service as a sign of disloyalty encouraged harassment of these religious groups and reported their activities to the Government.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Government routinely dismissed U.S. Government concerns, citing the absence of conflict between Christians and Muslims within the country and its concerns about disruptive practices of some religious groups that it feared would disrupt the country's "social harmony." In November 2006 the U.S. Secretary of State again designated Eritrea as a "Country of Particular Concern" 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 3.6 million. Although reliable statistics are not available, it is estimated that 50 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim and 30 percent is Orthodox Christian. Approximately 13 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, while groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhist, Hindus, and Baha'is. Approximately 2 percent of the population practice traditional indigenous religions. The population in the eastern and western lowlands is predominantly Muslim and predominantly Christian in the highlands. There are very few atheists. Religious participation is high among all ethnic groups.

Within geographic and ethnic groups, the majority of the Tigrinya are Orthodox Christian, with the exception of the Djiberti Tigrinya, who are Muslim. Most members of the Tigre, Saho, Nara, Afar, Rashaida, Beja, and Blen ethnic groups are Muslim. Approximately 40 percent of the Blen are Christian, the majority being Catholic. More than half of the Kunama are Catholic, with a large minority of Muslims and some who practice traditional indigenous religions. The central and southern highlands, which are generally more developed than the lowlands, are populated predominantly by Christian Tigrinyas as well as some Muslim Djiberti Tigrinya and Saho. The Afar and Rashaida, as well as some 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 most Tigre live in the western lowlands.

Foreign missionaries operate with some restrictions. Some missionaries and representatives of the restricted unregistered religious groups are present but keep an extremely low profile for fear of abuse of their congregations.

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, the Government had not implemented the Constitution by the end of the reporting period. The Government severely restricted this right in the case of numerous small Protestant churches, the Baha'is, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Government officially recognizes only four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Islam, and the Roman Catholic Church. Other religious groups must register with the Government before they are permitted to conduct religious activities and services. The Government does not require the four official religious groups to register and has refused to register other religious groups. In 2002, Meherete Yesus Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Faith Mission Church, and the Baha'i fully complied with registration requirements; however, to date they have not been registered by the Government.

Several other religious groups have complied partially with the registration requirements, and some have chosen not to submit any documentation. Registration requirements include a description of the history of the religious group in the country, an explanation of the "uniqueness" or benefit that the group offers compared with other religious groups already present, names and personal information of religious leaders, detailed information on assets and property owned by the group, and sources of funding from abroad. A government committee reviews the applications, which in theory are to be approved only if they conform to local culture.

The Government approved no registrations during the period covered by this report, despite repeated inquiries.

The Government requested that the four officially recognized religious groups provide an accounting of their financial sources, as well as lists of personnel and real property, and the religious groups have reportedly complied. The Government continued its involvement in the affairs of the four official religious groups and required them to provide a list of religious leaders and clergy so they can be enrolled in military/national service.

A presidential decree declaring that Jehovah's Witnesses had "forsaken their nationality" by refusing to vote or perform required military service continued to result in economic, employment, and travel difficulties for many members of the group, especially former civil servants and merchants.

Any religious organization that seeks facilities for worship other than private homes must obtain government approval to build such facilities.

The following holy days are recognized as official holidays by the Government: Christmas (both Orthodox and non-Orthodox), Epiphany (Christian), Eid al-Adha (Muslim), Good Friday (Christian), Easter (Christian), the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad (Muslim), New Year (Orthodox), Meskel (Orthodox), and Eid al-Fitr (Muslim).

Education is predominantly secular.

The Government made no effort to promote interfaith understanding or to coordinate interfaith dialogue.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Islam and Christianity, as practiced by the four official religious groups, are practiced widely and are for the most part tolerated, with persons allowed to worship freely. Following the 2002 government decree that certain religious groups must register or cease all religious activities, religious facilities not belonging to the four officially recognized religious groups were forced to close. Authorities in the Office of Religious Affairs told religious groups that home prayer meetings would be permitted, but the Government does not fully respect this guidance. They were also informed that a standing law would be used to prevent unregistered religious groups from holding political or other gatherings in private homes of more than three to five persons. In practice, authorities enforced this law.

Authorities harassed members of the four groups that applied for registration in 2002--the Meherete Yesus Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Faith Mission Church, and the Baha'is. Although the Government has sometimes allowed them to hold home prayer meetings, private study meetings, and for one group, private Sunday worship services in their church, security officials have nonetheless also arrested individuals for participating in such activities. Like other unregistered groups, their houses of worship remained closed and they were not permitted to meet in public settings. Religious groups such as the Kale Hiwot (Baptists), Full Gospel Church, and Meserete Kristos (Mennonite) Church complied with some, but not all, of the registration requirements. Treatment of these and other unregistered religious groups often varied by locale. Some local authorities allowed unregistered groups to worship in homes or rented spaces, whereas others did not allow them to meet at all.

The Government closely monitored the activities and movements of unregistered religious groups and members, including nonreligious social functions attended by members. In 2004 the Government also closed down an Orthodox congregation known as Medhane Alem. The Government continued to arrest, harass and threaten members of Medhane Alem, including arresting eight more members in January 2007.

The Government bans religious organizations from involvement in politics and restricts the right of religious media to comment on political matters. No religious groups--registered or unregistered--were allowed to produce religious periodicals. The Office of Religious Affairs within the Office of the Presidency monitors compliance with these proscriptions.

All religious entities must receive authorization from the Office of Religious Affairs to print and distribute documents. The Office of Religious Affairs routinely approved requests for authorization from registered groups and four unregistered churches; however, in the past other unregistered churches were unable to obtain authorization to print documents for distribution within their congregations.

Faith-based organizations are permitted to fund, but not to initiate or implement, development projects. Several religious groups executed small-scale development projects without government interference. The proclamation also set out rules governing relations between religious organizations and foreign sponsors.

The military has no chaplains. Military personnel were free to worship at nearby houses of worship for the four registered

religions. Military members reportedly were sometimes allowed to possess certain religious books to pray privately although not in groups. This rule is inconsistently enforced. Several members of unregistered religious groups reportedly were detained for violating this rule in the summer of 2006, and there were reports that while Muslims were able to have the Qur'an, Bibles were confiscated from Christian members of the military.

The Government forbids what it deems to be radical forms of Islam.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

During the reporting period, there were reliable reports that authorities detained at least 160 members of unregistered religious groups without charges. Some were released after detentions of several days or less, while others spent longer periods in confinement without charges and without access to legal counsel. Government restrictions made it difficult to determine the precise number of religious prisoners at any one time, and releases sometimes went unreported; however, the number of long-term prisoners continued to grow. Some nongovernmental organizations reported as many as 1,900 prisoners of conscience in detention.

The Government reportedly held individuals who were jailed for their religious affiliation at various locations, including facilities administered by the military, such as at Mai Serwa outside the capital and the more distant Sawa and Gelalo as well as police stations inside Asmara and other cities. Often, detainees were not formally charged, accorded due process, or allowed access to their families. While many were ostensibly jailed for evasion of military conscription, significant numbers were being held solely for their religious beliefs, and some were held in harsh conditions that included extreme temperature fluctuations. There were reports of torture. Many were required to recant their religious beliefs as a precondition of release.

The Government did not excuse individuals who objected to military conscription for religious reasons or reasons of conscience, nor did it provide for alternative national service. Based on their religious beliefs, most members of Jehovah's Witnesses refused to participate in national military service or to vote. Some Muslims objected to universal national service because of the requirement that Muslim women must perform military duty. Some members within the Catholic leadership also objected to priests and seminarians having to do military service, viewing such activities as violations of their vows.

Although members of several religious groups, including Muslims, reportedly were imprisoned in past years for failure to participate in national military service, the Government has singled out Jehovah's Witnesses for harsher treatment than that received by followers of other faiths for similar actions. Jehovah's Witnesses who did not participate in national military service were subject to dismissal from the civil service, revocation of their business licenses, eviction from government-owned housing, and denial of passports, identity cards, and exit visas. They were also prohibited from having their marriages legalized by the civil authorities.

In conducting searches for national military service evaders, security forces targeted gatherings of unregistered religious groups with a frequency not characteristic of its treatment of other groups' social gatherings or religious services, including those of the four officially recognized religions.

Arrests of individuals, ostensibly for noncompliance with national service requirements yet apparently targeting certain religious groups, continued throughout the reporting period. Individuals arrested were often detained for extended periods of time without due process. On occasion, charges were levied; however, generally individuals were held without charges.

Of the 450 individuals reported as detained during the previous reporting period, more than 300 remained incarcerated. Many of them were held in military prisons for not having performed required national military service, and most belonged to unregistered religious groups. Several pastors and dozens of women were among the imprisoned. Many refused to recant their faith and continued to be detained in civilian and military detention facilities across the country. Several were released after recanting their faith.

[The Government singled out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment. According to credible sources, a total of 25 Jehovah's Witnesses were being held without charges or trial. Thirteen were being detained at Sawa, eight for allegedly failing to perform national military service. Detainees above the cut-off age for national service eligibility \(48 for men and 27 for women\) were reportedly held for attending religious meetings, preaching, or visiting families of escapees.](#)

Jehovah's Witnesses were jailed in harsh conditions for varying periods; at least three individuals were detained for more than 12 years, reportedly for evading compulsory military service. However, the maximum legal penalty for refusing to perform national service is 2 years. In the past, Ministry of Justice officials have denied that any Jehovah's Witnesses were in detention without charge, although they acknowledged that some of them and a number of Muslims were jailed for evading national service.

There were reports that the security forces tortured those detained for their religious beliefs. In October 2006, there were credible reports that two members of an unregistered church died from injuries after being severely beaten and tortured. In February 2007, there were credible reports another member of an unregistered religious group died after enduring torture and illness. There were reports throughout the reporting period that individuals held in detention were beaten and tortured.

During the reporting period, the Government released a prominent Evangelical singer for medical treatment for injuries sustained from torture during detention.

There were credible reports that some detainees were required to sign statements as a condition of release renouncing or agreeing not to practice their faith or, in a small number of cases, to "return to the faith of their fathers," which some detainees understood to mean becoming a member of the Orthodox Church. In some cases in which detainees refused to sign such documents, relatives were asked to convince them to do so. In some cases authorities demanded letters from priests of the Orthodox Church confirming that the individuals returned to the Orthodox Church.

At the end of the period covered by this report, 28 leaders and pastors of the unregistered Pentecostal churches had been detained for more than 3 years without due process.

In April 2007 nearly 80 members of an unregistered religious group were arrested in Asmara while attending a worship service despite having received authorization from the Office of Religious Affairs for the service to be held. In February 2007, police arrested 10 members of an unregistered church at a party following a wedding.

In January 2007 police arrested eight members of the Medhane Alem congregation of the Orthodox Christian Church. The eight individuals were employees of various government ministries and were arrested while at work. There were reports that they were interrogated by police and asked to name other members of the congregation.

In Assab police arrested 25 members of unregistered churches. All 25 were reportedly being detained at the Wi'a Military Camp.

At the Sawa Military School, school authorities conducted a check on the student conscripts and seized more than 100 Bibles. After burning the Bibles, authorities subjected the students to severe punishment.

In Asmara the pastor of one of the unregistered churches was arrested in January 2007. He remained in detention at the end of the reporting period.

During the second week of November 2006, the Government orchestrated a large-scale campaign to arrest members of unregistered religious groups in Mendefera, in the heart of the predominately Christian central highlands. Initial reports claimed that the Government arrested more than 150 Protestant Christians from the Church of Living God, Kaile Hiwot, and other churches.

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

In September 2006 the Government ordered the departure of a foreigner who was an active member in the Evangelical Episcopalian Church and in the small school run by the Church.

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

In May 2006 50 evangelical Christian students enrolled and boarding at Mai Nefhiy Educational Institution were arrested and subjected to severe punishment by authorities, ostensibly for refusing to participate in events surrounding Eritrean Liberation Day. At the end of the reporting period, they were detained at Sawa. In August 2006 some students were released from detention, but only after they signed documents recanting their faith. The released students were prevented from registering for school. The other students remain incarcerated.

There were reports that authorities detained three members of an unregistered church in Nefasit. One church member, who had been forced to leave behind an extremely sick child who later died, was released on bail.

In spring 2006 the BBC reported that a British missionary was detained for several days, and subsequently expelled, for distributing Bibles. In February 2006, a canon of the Evangelical Episcopalian Church, who was on a temporary visit from the United Kingdom, was ordered to leave.

While participating in short-term retraining at the Sawa military training facility, 75 Christians were detained and punished for reading the Bible. They refused to recant at least three times and continued to be held at Sawa.

In January 2006 a member of one of the unregistered churches was arrested and detained in Asmara. Several weeks later his wife was also detained in a separate facility. Both reportedly were still being held at the end of the reporting period.

Over the Christmas 2005 holiday, 78 individuals were detained after raids on businesses owned by evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, and other members of unregistered churches. Two individuals were released after paying a bail of \$10,000 (150,000 nakfa) and signing pledges not to practice their faith. During the raid, several church members managed to escape and depart the country or go into hiding. Authorities threatened their family members who remained in the country with arrest and detention if they did not turn in those who had escaped or gone into hiding. More than 50 of those detained remained in custody.

In October 2005, the Government ordered the long-time pastor of the Evangelical Episcopalian church to depart the country.

During September 2005, there were reports of the arrest of more than 200 evangelical Christians and members of unregistered churches, including 20 members of the Hallelujah and Philadelphia churches, for organizing a wedding party in Asmara. While the members of the Hallelujah and Philadelphia churches were reportedly released one month later, more than 75 were subjected to further detention and were being held at Sawa.

In August 2005 police arrested a bridal couple and 18 wedding guests from an unregistered church during the private wedding ceremony in the bride's home. The bridal couple was released on bail and the 18 guests remained in detention.

In Asmara the pastor of one of the unregistered churches was arrested. He remained in detention.

Throughout the reporting period there were unconfirmed reports that nearly 100 Muslims were arrested and detained. There were reports that 70 Muslims, who oppose the mufti appointed by the Government more than 10 years ago, continued to be detained as they refused to honor his presence.

The Government continued to maintain a high degree of control over the operations of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, highlighting concerns regarding the independence and freedom of religious practice permitted within the Church by the Government. In August 2005, the Government appointed a lay administrator to manage and oversee church operations, in contravention to the Orthodox Church Constitution. Shortly after this appointment, the Holy Synod voted to remove church Patriarch Abune Antonios on putative charges that he had committed heresy and was no longer following church doctrine. A new patriarch, Abune Dioscoros, was selected by the synod. The deposed patriarch continued to be able to serve as a priest; however, he was forbidden to conduct church services. In January 2006, the deposed patriarch objected to his removal through a letter sent, and made public, to the Holy Synod. In the letter he denied the charges against him and excommunicated several synod members, as well as the lay administrator, stating that their actions, and those of the Government, violated the Constitution and bylaws of the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

Abune Antonios remained essentially under house arrest and was not seen. In January 2007 there were credible reports that government officials raided his home and removed all of his patriarchal vestments and personal religious items. According to church officials, Dioscoros was the new patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, and he was officially voted in as the patriarch in April 2007.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were reports that police forced some adherents of unregistered religious groups to sign statements to abandon their faiths and join the Orthodox Christian Church as a precondition of their release.

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 Abuse and Discrimination

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

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

Few religious leaders in the country took a strong public stance in defense of freedom of conscience for all faiths out of fear of being arrested.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Despite repeated attempts, U.S. embassy officials were not permitted by the Government to meet with religious leaders.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers raised the cases of detention and restrictions on unregistered religious groups with officials in the President's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the leaders of the sole legal political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice.

In September 2004 the U.S. Secretary of State designated Eritrea as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The Secretary renewed the designation the following year and applied sanctions under the Arms Export Control Act that prohibited the commercial sale of certain defense articles and services.

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