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2010 Report on International Religious Freedom - Eritrea

[Covers the period from July 1, 2009, to June 30, 2010]

The 1997 constitution, and the former constitution implemented in 1952 both provide for religious freedom; however, the government has yet to implement the 1997 constitution. Although the government requires religious groups to register; it has not approved any registrations beyond the country's four principal religious groups since 2002: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea, Islam, and the Roman Catholic Church.

The government's record on religious freedom remained poor. The government continued to harass and detain thousands of members of unregistered religious groups and retained substantial control over the four registered religious groups. The government failed to approve religious groups that fulfilled the registration requirements and arrested persons during religious gatherings. The government subjected religious prisoners to harsher conditions and held them for long periods of time, without due process. There continued to be reports of forced recantations of faith, torture of religious prisoners, and deaths while in custody.

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Citizens generally were tolerant of one another in the practice of their religion with the exception of societal attitudes toward Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostal groups, and conscientious objectors. Some individuals viewed failure to perform the required military service as a sign of disloyalty and encouraged harassment of those unwilling to perform military duty.

The U.S. government makes regular efforts to discuss religious freedom with the government. Despite repeated attempts government authorities responsible for religious affairs did not grant U.S. embassy officials opportunities to discuss instances of religious freedom abuse. On January 16, 2009, the U.S. Secretary of State redesignated the country a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 48,489 square miles and a population of 5.8 million. Although reliable statistics are not available, it is estimated that 50 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, 30 percent is Orthodox Christian, and 13 percent is Roman Catholic. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is. Approximately 2 percent of the population practices indigenous religious beliefs. The population is predominantly Muslim in the eastern and western lowlands and predominantly Christian in the highlands. Religious participation is high among all ethnic

groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides the freedom to practice any religion; however, the government has yet to implement the constitution since its ratification in 1997.

The government has officially registered four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea, Islam, and the Roman Catholic Church. The government has not approved the registrations of the Meherete Yesus Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Faith Mission Church, and Baha'i Faith, despite their being fully compliant with the registration requirements since 2002. Those registrations required only the president's signature for full approval.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Islamic New Year, Epiphany, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Good Friday, Easter, Meskel, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Christmas.

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

For the final year of high school, students were required to attend the Sawa Military Training Camp. Conscientious objector status was not recognized. The center was noted for its abuse of trainees, especially young women, and many students quit high school or risked their lives attempting to escape illegally from the country before their final year of high school. Several adult Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned at the camp, some since 1994, and they had not been released at the end of the reporting period. Individuals whose religious beliefs included maintaining conscientious objector status are especially likely to quit high school or leave the country illegally before their final year of high school studies to avoid this obligatory military training. Individuals who do not complete military training do not receive military discharge papers and are unable to function normally in society; many experience economic, employment, and travel difficulties. In addition some Muslims objected to the requirement that Muslim women perform military duty.

Religious groups must receive authorization from the Office of Religious Affairs to print and distribute documents. The Office of Religious Affairs routinely approved requests from recognized religious organizations; however, unregistered churches occasionally were unable to obtain authorization to print materials for distribution within their congregations.

Religious groups required the approval of the government to conduct religious services or other activities. The Office of Religious Affairs reviewed applications. Registration requirements included a description of the history of the religious group in the country, an explanation of the uniqueness or benefit the group offered compared with other religious groups already present, names and personal information of religious leaders, detailed information on assets and property the group owns, conformity to "local culture," and sources of funding from abroad. Complete registrations required the president's signature.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government's record on religious freedom remained poor. The government continued to harass and detain members of registered and unregistered religious groups

and retained significant control over the four registered religious groups.

The government forbids religious practice outside the four recognized faiths, and even recognized faiths are often forbidden from managing their own operations and finances. The government has appointed both the mufti (head) of the Islamic faith in the country and the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, in addition to numerous lower level positions. Those who publically protested such direct government management were branded as radicals and could be subject to indefinite imprisonment in harsh conditions, despite being members of recognized religious faiths. The government did not appoint the president of the Lutheran Church; however, reliable sources indicated extensive government coordination. The Pope appointed the highest-ranking Catholic Church official; however, the government pressured the church on its activities. Unregistered faiths reported having their mail confiscated and do not use local Internet providers to send or receive information related to their faith for fear of being monitored.

Following a 2002 government decree that all religious groups must register or cease all religious activities, religious facilities that did not belong to the four officially recognized religious groups were forced to close. Some local authorities allowed unregistered groups to worship in homes or rented spaces, whereas others did not allow such groups to meet. During the reporting period, the government continued to disrupt home-based worship and arrested those who hosted home prayer meetings.

In December 2009 the UN imposed sanctions on the country for arming, training, and equipping armed groups and their members including al-Shabaab (designated as a foreign terrorist organization), that aimed to destabilize the region, and for occupying disputed territory on its border with Djibouti. Following the sanctions government-controlled media branded the UN and Western governments as imperialist entities. In this context unrecognized religious groups, which have long been characterized as imperialist forces under the control of Western governments, received additional harassment.

The application for an exit visa requires a designation of religious affiliation, and Christians must include their religious denomination in the application. Members of registered faiths can often obtain exit visas if they have completed national service requirements and were of retirement age. Members of unregistered faiths required additional permission from the Office of Religious Affairs, which granted permission, denied permission, or immediately arrested the applicant.

Military personnel were sometimes allowed to possess certain religious books to pray privately. This practice continued to be inconsistently applied. There were reports from Christian members of the military that Bibles were confiscated and sometimes burned, and carrying a Bible has been used as grounds for arrest.

The government continued its involvement in the affairs of the four registered religious groups and required them to provide a list of religious leaders for enrollment in military and national service. The government maintained control over the operations of the Eritrean Orthodox Church; a government-appointed lay administrator managed church operations and controlled all church donations. The government continued to provide the Catholic Church with limited duration national service exemption cards for all religious workers and seminarians.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Authorities regularly harassed, arrested, and detained members of various religious groups. The government closely monitored the activities and movements of unregistered religious groups and members, including nonreligious social functions attended by members. Persons arrested for religious reasons were often detained for extended periods in harsher conditions and without due process.

The government held individuals jailed for their religious affiliation at various locations, including military-administered facilities, such as Mai Serwa, Sawa, Meiter, and Gelalo,

as well as police stations in the capital and other cities. Prisoners were held in harsh conditions, and there were at least five deaths while in custody during the reporting period due to neglect or the infliction of life-threatening injuries and the denial of medical treatment. Often, prisoners were not formally charged, accorded due process, or allowed access to their families. While many were ostensibly jailed for evasion of conscription, significant numbers were held solely for their religious beliefs. Many prisoners were required to recant their religious beliefs as a precondition of release and/or pay fines.

In June and July 2009, unsanitary conditions led to a meningitis outbreak in Wi'a prison that caused the death of 50 prisoners, including an unknown number of religious prisoners. Released religious prisoners reported confinement in harsh and unusual conditions. Some prisoners were confined in metal shipping containers subject to extreme temperature fluctuations. Other prisoners experienced extended periods of solitary confinement. Religious prisoners also reported being confined in underground unventilated cement cells without sanitation facilities with up to 200 other prisoners. When prisoners passed out from the heat and stench, they were taken outside briefly to be revived and returned to the underground cell. Some prisoners were hung from trees in painful positions for several weeks until they could no longer move their arms and legs, requiring other prisoners to feed and bathe them. Religious prisoners also reported being forced to walk barefoot on sharp rocks and thorns for one hour per day, beaten with hard plastic and metal rods in order to extract confessions, and threatened with death if they did not recant their faith.

During the reporting period, there were reliable reports that authorities detained approximately 115 members of unregistered religious groups without legitimate charges. Some were released after detentions of several days or less, while others spent longer periods in confinement without charge and without access to legal counsel, or were not released. Government restrictions made it difficult to determine the precise number of religious prisoners at any one time, and releases sometimes went unreported; however, the number of long-term religious prisoners continued to grow. As another indicator Meiter prison, constructed in 2009 to hold religious and other prisoners, was reportedly filled to capacity. At the end of the reporting period, 2,000 to 3,000 members of unregistered groups remained in prison, 10 of whom were Pentecostal leaders and pastors in detention for more than three years without due process; 30 others reportedly had been released by the end of the reporting period.

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

On Good Friday, April 2, 2010, 27 members of the Asmara Full Gospel Church were arrested and held in a police station in Asmara; electronic materials were confiscated from members. In June 2010 several of those arrested were released, while others were separated and moved to different police stations farther away from their families. Several of the religious prisoners reported being released after signing a form stating that they recanted their faith.

According to the Voice of the Martyrs, on March 27, 2010, military officials arrested 17 young men gathered for prayer in the town of Segheneyti. The prisoners reportedly were detained while carrying out their compulsory national military service and were being held at a local police station.

According to the Voice of the Martyrs, a Canadian-based nonprofit organization, on

March 2, 2010, Efrem Habtemichel Hagos died of malaria and pneumonia while in solitary confinement in Adi-Nefase military camp in Assab. He reportedly was denied proper medical treatment because he refused to recant his beliefs. He was the 12th person known to have died while being incarcerated at this camp.

According to the Voice of the Martyrs, on January 24, 2010, Hana Hagos Asgedom, a member of Asabe Rhema Church, died of a heart attack at the Alla military camp. Hana, who had been detained at Wi'a military camp for three years following her arrest in 2007, was moved to the Alla military camp when the Wi'a camp was dismantled due to a meningitis outbreak. On arrival at the new camp, Hana was offered a final opportunity to renounce her faith. When she refused, she was placed in solitary confinement. Shortly before her death, she reportedly endured beatings with an iron rod for refusing to "make the chief commander in the camp a cup of coffee," an order local persons believed was in reality a sexual advance. She was then returned to her cell, where she received further punishment and eventually died.

In December 2009 government officials arrested 27 female religious believers during prayers at a home in Asmara. During an interview with Reuters, the minister of information stated that he was sure they had committed a crime.

On October 14, 2009, the government raided the home of the founding elder of the Full Gospel Church in Asmara and arrested three persons. Two days later seven others were arrested. The founding elder, who suffered from an ulcer, was taken to prison but then returned home to remain under house arrest.

According to Open Doors USA, on September 3, 2009, Mesfin Gebrekristos died at the Wi'a prison as part of the meningitis outbreak caused by unsanitary conditions and lack of health care. He was the fourth person believed to have died in detention during 2009.

According to the Dutch branch of Open Doors, on July 23, 2009, Yemane Kahasay of the Kale-Hiwot Church in Medefera died in the Metier prison after being tortured for 18 months without medical treatment. At the time of his death, Yemane was suffering from a severe case of malaria and had been placed in solitary confinement for refusing to sign a form recanting his faith.

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

On June 28, 2009, police arrested 23 Jehovah's Witnesses as they met for worship in Asmara. Most of the arrested were wives or daughters of previously arrested men, leaving entire households imprisoned in some instances. Although police released some women, two young children and their mothers remained in detention at the end of the reporting period.

It was unknown how many of the approximately 115 individuals detained during the previous reporting period remained incarcerated. Many of them were held in military prisons for failing to perform required national military service, but most were held for simply belonging to unregistered religious groups. Others were held for not belonging to any specific religious group and were told they would be released after joining one of the four registered religious groups. Several pastors and dozens of women were among those imprisoned. Many refused to recant their faith and continued to be detained in civilian and military detention facilities across the country; however, some were released after recanting their faith and/or paying fines. There were credible reports that at least five religious prisoners died due to lack of medical treatment. At least 81 religious prisoners were released during the reporting period, but many were released only after paying fines and/or signing a form indicating they had recanted their faith and receiving threats of execution or further imprisonment if they continued to practice their faith.

In March 2010, 30 religious prisoners were released, including at least three formerly prominent church leaders.

According to the Voice of the Martyrs, on February 15, 2010, two religious prisoners were released on bail from Meiter prison. The men had been imprisoned in the camp for the past year and a half after they were caught engaging in religious activities with fellow soldiers. Upon their release they were sent back to the military units where they had served before their arrests.

According to the Voice of the Martyrs, on February 5, 2010, 12 persons being held at the Adi-Nefase military camp in Assab for the past two years were released on bail. Upon their release they were warned that they would be executed if they participated in religious activities with unregistered churches.

According to Open Doors USA, on January 21, 2010, a Full Gospel Church leader imprisoned since 2008 was released, reportedly due to medical complications from his diabetes. Upon his release he was warned not to continue religious activities with unregistered faiths.

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

On September 6, 2009, the government called a meeting of religious groups entitled "Working Along with the Police to Prevent Crime in the Country" where religious followers were intimidated and asked to report on the religious activities of Christian groups in the neighborhoods. Members of nontraditional religious groups were reluctant to discuss their concerns with diplomatic and NGO representatives.

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

There was no information on the whereabouts or status of 15 members of the Kalet Hiwot Church in Keren, arrested in January 2009, nor of 34 members of the same group arrested in November 2008.

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

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

There was no information on the whereabouts or status of more than 110 evangelical Christians, including members of the Kalet Hiwot Church, the Full Gospel Church, and the Church of the Living God, arrested in November 2008. Likewise, there was no information about students at military and private boarding schools detained after protesting the October 2008 burning of more than 1,500 Bibles by government officials.

There was no information on the whereabouts of two persons identified as Christians arrested in June 2008 in Massawa for proselytizing or of 28 evangelical Christians arrested in May 2008 and detained in Adi Abeto military prison.

There was no information regarding 25 Protestants arrested in May 2008 in Asmara; unconfirmed reports indicated that some of them died during the Wi'a prison meningitis outbreak.

There was no information regarding 180 Muslims detained in 2008 for refusing to honor the presence of the mufti appointed by the government in 1993.

There was no information regarding 28 of the 38 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses who were arrested in February 2008.

The government continued to detain 35 men, women, and children who belonged to the unregistered Faith Missions Church and who were arrested on Christmas Eve 2007; 45 members of an unregistered Christian church who were arrested in October 2007; and the pastor of the Kalet Hiwot Church, arrested in the Dekemhare region in October 2007.

The whereabouts of a priest arrested in October 2007 during an approved Bible study class at the Orthodox Church remained unknown during the reporting period.

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

Although members of several religious groups were imprisoned in past years for failure to participate in required national military service, the government singled out Jehovah's Witnesses to receive harsher treatment than that given to followers of other religious groups for similar actions. Jehovah's Witnesses and other conscientious objectors were normally willing to perform nonmilitary national service. At least three Jehovah's Witnesses were detained for 15 years, reportedly for evading compulsory military service, far beyond the maximum legal penalty of two years for refusing to perform national service. In addition Jehovah's Witnesses who did not participate in national military service were subject to dismissal from the civil service, revocation of business licenses, eviction from government-owned housing, and denial of passports, identity cards, and exit visas. They also were prohibited from having civil authorities legalize their marriages.

In April 2010 government actions to clarify the status of nongovernmental organizations created conditions that forced the closure of the Catholic Relief Services, making the Catholic Church less able to care for its followers and become more dependent upon the government. The government repeatedly harassed the Catholic Church throughout the reporting period, and it was unable to operate freely. In November 2009 the government confiscated building materials the Catholic Church had purchased legally. The government provided no letter or other warning with regard to the confiscated building materials. Building materials were especially hard to obtain because of the severe shortage and the need to purchase materials from government-controlled businesses.

The government seized private property from both recognized and unrecognized faiths in unannounced raids during the reporting period. The government continued to retain several vehicles belonging to religious groups that authorities impounded in early 2009.

Forced Religious Conversion

There continued to be reports that police forced some adherents of unregistered religious groups held in detention to sign statements declaring that they abandoned their faith and joined a recognized faith as a precondition of their release. These individuals typically faced imprisonment and/or severe beating until they agreed to sign the documents. Reports indicated these individuals also were monitored afterward to ensure they did not practice or proselytize for their unregistered religion. In some cases authorities demanded letters from priests of the Orthodox Church confirming that the individuals returned to the Orthodox Church. Similarly, police forced individuals who chose not to identify with a specific religious group, registered or otherwise, to choose a registered religious group or face continued detention.

There were no reports of forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Citizens generally accepted religious pluralism. Christians and Muslims in Asmara often celebrated their holidays jointly. However, Jehovah's Witnesses followers faced societal discrimination because of their refusal to participate in the 1993 independence referendum and their refusal to perform national military service. There was also some prejudice against other unregistered religious groups. Some persons reportedly cooperated with government authorities by reporting on and harassing members of those groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government makes regular efforts to discuss religious freedom with the government. Despite repeated attempts government authorities responsible for religious affairs did not grant U.S. embassy officials opportunities to discuss specific instances of religious freedom abuse.

During the reporting period, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not respond to requests for meetings with embassy officers, making it impossible to raise the cases of detentions and restrictions of individuals from registered and unregistered religious groups.

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