



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

**Testimony by Fr. Thomas Reese, Commissioner
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**

**Hearing on
“Eritrea: Root Causes of the Refugee Crisis”
Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

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2:30 – 4:00 pm
2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Chairman Hultgren, Chairman McGovern, and other members of the Commission: Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) on religious freedom conditions in Eritrea.

My name is Thomas Reese, a USCIRF Commissioner and the most recent past chair of the Commission from 2016-2017. USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission that monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad, using international standards to do so, and makes policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress. USCIRF is led by nine Commissioners who are appointed by the White House and the leadership of both houses of Congress from both parties.

Since May 2004, USCIRF has recommended annually that the Secretary of State designate Eritrea as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In September 2004, the State Department designated Eritrea a CPC and it has remained on that list ever since. Eritrea remains one of the worst examples of state-sponsored repression of freedom of religion or belief in the world.

USCIRF’s 2018 annual report will be released later this month, and in it we document the systematic abuses the Eritrean government perpetrated in 2017 and offer recommendations for applying increased pressure on the Eritrean government to make reforms and respect the religious freedoms of its people.

Overview

Although Eritrea achieved independence from Ethiopia in 1993, the two countries remained in a violent border conflict until 2000, and in 2002 the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary

Commission issued a decision on the demarcation of the state boundaries. However, relations between the two countries remain poor and President Isaias Afwerki, who has ruled Eritrea since independence, has used the tensions to legitimize Eritrea's highly securitized environment, indefinite military service, and forced labor. The Eritrean government does not trust or recognize religious communities which are relatively newer to the country. In 2002, the government enacted a number of new restrictive laws. They officially banned all political parties other than the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and decreed that all religious groups must apply to be officially registered and cease all religious activities until approved. Laws restricting official registration in a state are an important indicator of the level of freedom for groups to practice their religion or beliefs and are too often a tool of repressive governments to inhibit a range of freedoms.

Eritrea officially recognizes and allows activities of four religious groups – the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, the Roman Catholic Church, Sunni Islam, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. While many other religious communities exist, such as Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Presbyterians, and Methodists, they have been denied registration and are persecuted or face discrimination. The situation is particularly grave for unregistered Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian communities and Jehovah's Witnesses; over the past year, the Eritrean government increased its persecution of these groups. Security forces arrested followers of these faiths for participating in clandestine prayer meetings and religious ceremonies. The government requires indefinite national service with no alternative for conscientious objectors, and Eritreans who refuse to participate are detained, sentenced to hard labor, abused, and have their legal documents confiscated. Religious practice is prohibited in the military and conscripts are severely punished if found with religious materials or participating in religious gatherings. The government dominates the internal affairs of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, the country's largest Christian denomination, and suppresses the religious activities of Muslims. Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios has been held under house arrest since 2007 for opposing government interference in internal church affairs.

Persecution of Non-Registered Religious Groups

Unregistered religious communities have continued to practice in secret at the risk of being arrested and imprisoned. In the past year, Eritrean authorities conducted waves of door-to-door searches and arrests of individuals because of their religious identity, and increased oppression of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian communities. In May 2017, authorities arrested almost 100 Christians nationwide, including 49 Evangelicals at a secret wedding in Asmara, and in June, police arrested an additional 70 Pentecostals and Evangelicals in house-to-house searches. In August, authorities arrest 23 Christians in the capital, Asmara. Several Evangelical and Pentecostal pastors have been detained for more than 10 years.

The government continues to persecute Jehovah's Witnesses and since 1994 has denied them basic citizenship rights, such as access to identity and travel documents, because of their religious beliefs. Jehovah's Witnesses are persecuted for their political neutrality and conscientious objection to military service, which are aspects of their faith. In 2017, three more Jehovah's Witnesses were reported arrested for their religious activities or unknown reasons, and the government of Eritrea still holds 55 Witnesses in detention. Jehovah's Witnesses Paulos

Eyassu, Issac Mogos, and Negede Teklemariam are Eritrea's longest-serving religious prisoners. They have been imprisoned in Sawa Prison without trial since September 24, 1994, for refusing military service.

Although it is not possible to know the total number of individuals who have been imprisoned or disappeared, the State Department estimates that between 1,200 and 3,000 individuals are held on religious grounds. Prisoners are also prohibited from practicing their faith or possessing religious books. Released religious prisoners continue to report that they were kept in solitary confinement, crowded conditions, or underground barracks, and subjected to extreme temperature fluctuations. In addition, reports of deaths of religious prisoners due to harsh treatment or denial of medical care continue. Released Christian prisoners have reported being pressured to recant their faith and sign statements agreeing to no longer practice or engage in religious activities.

Oppression of State Authorized Religious Groups

While permitted to practice their faith and express their beliefs, officially registered groups are heavily monitored and controlled. The Eritrean government has long been acutely concerned about the potential interference of foreign governments and organizations, including in religious affairs, and in 1995 issued Proclamation No. 73/1995 with specific restrictions on relations with outsiders. The Proclamation bars religious groups from being involved in politics, from issuing publications related to political issues, and from hiring foreign employees or receiving foreign funding without approval of the government. This Proclamation also established a department of religious affairs tasked with overseeing the activities of registered religious institutions. The Catholic Church has been afforded some permissions to receive foreign funding from the Holy See and to engage more with international religious actors, but still under government scrutiny.

The government often appoints religious leaders for Muslims and Christians and arrests and imprisons those who protest the decisions. One example is the forced change of leadership of the Eritrean Orthodox Church – the largest Christian denomination and one of the four officially permitted religions. Although he was elected as the third Patriarch of the Church in 2004, Patriarch Abune Antonios was arrested and deposed by the Eritrean government in 2006 for protesting government interference in Church affairs. At 90 years old, he remains in detention at an undisclosed location, and denied due process. As part of USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, which was launched last year, I advocate for the release of Patriarch Antonios and for his right to resume his leadership position. Last July, Patriarch Antonios was seen in public for the first time in 10 years – escorted by Eritrean security forces to a Mass in Asmara and then quickly returned to house arrest. It was evidence that he was still alive, an answer to the prayers of his many followers.

Last month, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila Keetharuth, reported that hundreds of people have been arrested this year for protesting the death of Haji Musa Mohamednur, 93, who died in prison. Haji Musa was a senior member of the board of Al Diaa private Islamic school in Asmara who was arrested and imprisoned last year along with other school leadership for opposing the alleged government

attempt to take over the school and impose new restrictions – including banning students from wearing the hijab and prohibiting religious teachings. The Eritrean Ministry of Information responded to international reports about protests and the situation by saying that they were sensationalist and false, and that the Ministry of Education is appropriately enforcing its secular system as it has done with other religious schools.

Censorship of the Press and Religious Communities

Freedom of religion or belief is inextricably linked with the freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. The Eritrean government restricts all of these out of fear that they threaten the stability of the country, yet the surges we have witnessed in migration and asylum applications are a hallmark of unstable conditions. In this tightly centralized and securitized environment, independent journalism is fully suppressed – Eritrea in 2017 ranked 179 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index – just ahead of North Korea. State-run media has provided minimal and vague information about prisoners. Independent international observers have repeatedly been denied access to the country. This clampdown on the flow of information and unreliability of official news reports presents a significant challenge to human rights work and obtaining credible information on the experiences of persecuted religious groups.

The government of Eritrea surveils the religious services of the four recognized religious groups both in Eritrea as well as in diaspora communities around the world and encourages people to report on one another. The government has also sought to exert control over religious expression even of Eritreans abroad, including reportedly pressuring individuals to only attend government-approved Orthodox churches in the United States. Opposition groups and critics of the Eritrean government are often accused of being highly polarized in their accounts of the human rights and religious freedom conditions in country.

U.S. Policy

United States relations with Eritrea continue to be poor. U.S. officials in Eritrea have been able to attend religious ceremonies of the four official religious groups and meet with both registered and unregistered religious community representatives. However, connections are limited as USAID was expelled from Eritrea in 2005 and U.S. programs in country ended in 2006. U.S. foreign policy is focused predominantly on security concerns.

In 2009, the United States joined a 13-member majority to adopt [UN Security Council Resolution 1907](#), sanctioning Eritrea for supporting armed groups in Somalia and failing to withdraw its forces from the Eritrea-Djibouti border following clashes with Djibouti. The sanctions include an arms embargo, travel restrictions, and asset freezes on the Eritrean government's political and military leaders, as well as on other individuals designated by the Security Council's Committee on Somalia Sanctions. In 2011, the United States voted in favor of [UN Security Council Resolution 2023](#), which calls on UN member states to implement Resolution 1907's sanctions and ensure their dealings with Eritrea's mining industry do not support activities that would destabilize the region. In 2017, the U.S. government voted in the UN Security Council to retain an arms embargo on Eritrea and to renew the Monitoring Group

on Somalia and Eritrea. The U.S. government also imposed new two-year sanctions as of March 2017, in response to Eritrea's assistance to North Korea.

U.S. officials continually raise religious freedom issues when speaking about Eritrea or with the government, and Eritrea has been designated a CPC by the State Department since 2004. Notably, Eritrea is the only country where a specific sanction for religious freedom violations under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) has been imposed. The State Department most recently re-designated Eritrea as a CPC in December 2017, and continued the presidential action of the arms embargo, although since 2011 this has been under the auspices of UN Security Council Resolution 1907.

USCIRF Recommendations

In light of the breadth and scope of the ongoing, systematic, and egregious violations in Eritrea, USCIRF recommends stronger U.S. engagement on religious freedom issues. Specifically, the U.S. government should:

- Re-designate Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA;
- Maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations;
- Use bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to urge the government of Eritrea to:
 - Release unconditionally and immediately detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities, including Orthodox Patriarch Antonios;
 - End religious persecution of unregistered religious communities and register such groups;
 - Grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses;
 - Provide for conscientious objection by law in compliance with international human rights standards;
 - Bring national laws and regulations, including registration requirements for religious communities, into compliance with international human rights standards;
 - Bring the conditions and treatment of prisoners in line with international standards; and
 - 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;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;

- Seek a meeting for U.S. Embassy officials with Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Antonios;
- Support the renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea;
- Encourage the African Union to establish an accountability mechanism to investigate, prosecute, and try individuals accused of committing crimes against humanity in Eritrea, as recommended in 2016 by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea and the UN Human Rights Council; and
- Sponsor a UN General Assembly resolution denouncing Eritrea's gross religious freedom and human rights violations.