**Oral Comments**

# Hearing on

**“Eritrea: Root Causes of the Refugee Crisis”**

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

April 18, 2018

2:30 – 4:00 pm

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

 Chairman Hultgren, Chairman McGovern, and all members and guests 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).

I am Father Thomas J. Reese and have served as a USCIRF Commissioner since 2014. In my remarks I will provide just a few points on religious freedom conditions in Eritrea that are more fully developed in my written testimony. I request that my written testimony be submitted for the record.

Eritrea has long been one of the worst examples of state-sponsored suppression of freedom of religion or belief anywhere in the world. 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.

USCIRF’s 2018 annual report will be released later this month and in it we once again document the systematic abuses the government has perpetrated in the past year. The Eritrean government does not trust or recognize religious communities which are relatively newer to the country, and only officially recognizes and allows activities of four religious groups: The Coptic Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, Sunni Islam, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. Any groups that are not formally registered, in essence all but these official four, are completely repressed.

In the past year, Eritrean authorities conducted waves of door to door searches and arrests of individuals for their religious identity. In May 2017 alone authorities arrested almost 100 Christians, including 49 Evangelicals at a secret wedding in the capital, Asmara (As-MAR-Uh).

The government still persecutes Jehovah’s Witnesses and denies them basic citizenship rights, including access to identity and travel documents. At least three Jehovah’s Witnesses are Eritrea’s longest-serving religious prisoners, having been imprisoned without trial since 1994. Although it is not possible to know the total number of individuals who have been detained, the State Department reports between 1,200 and 3,000 individuals are held on religious grounds.

Activities of the officially registered groups, too, are heavily monitored and controlled. The government has appointed its own religious leaders for Muslims and Christians and arrested and imprisoned 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 ***[hold up photo]*** 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 is denied due process. As part of USCIRF’s Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, I have been advocating for the release of Father 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 (As-MAR-Uh) and then quickly returned to house arrest. It was evidence that he was still alive, an answer to prayers for many of his followers. Let me use this opportunity once more to call on the Eritrean government to immediately release Father Antonios and allow him to resume his religious duties without restriction.

Freedom of religion or belief is inextricably linked with 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, obtaining credible information can be a significant challenge.

Yet we know this: that thousands remain detained because of their religious identity. We know from reports of those who are released that religious prisoners of conscience endure horrific conditions. They are denied medical care, kept in solitary confinement or overpacked cells, and subjected to extreme cold and heat. Every year, some do not survive these harsh conditions. Clearly, many Eritreans are willing to risk poverty, enslavement, and even death in order to escape the appalling repression of President Isaias and his government.

Given these ongoing trends, it is our recommendation that the US strengthen its engagement on religious freedom issues in Eritrea.

Specifically, the US government must use all available channels to press the government of Eritrea to end the persecution of unregistered religious groups and to process their registration applications;

We must also never cease in urging the government of Eritrea to release detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities. As a part of this, US officials should consistently request to meet with Father Antonios and other detained religious leaders at every available opportunity.

Finally, the US government should maintain the existing arms embargo and use the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act to sanction specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for religious freedom violations. We must not relent until we have helped to bring about a complete transformation in the human rights and religious freedom conditions within Eritrea.

My thanks again to the Commission for holding this very important hearing, and with that I conclude my remarks.