



Eritrea – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 21 January 2010

Treatment of Pentecostals.

The October 2009 *United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report* for Eritrea, notes:

"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." (United States Department of State (26 October 2009) *Eritrea: International Religious Freedom Report - 2009*)

The report continues:

"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. At the end of the reporting period, reports indicated there were more than 3,000 Christians from unregistered groups detained in prison. These reports included nearly 40 leaders and pastors of Pentecostal churches in detention, some for more than three years without due process.

It is unknown how many of the 300 individuals detained during the previous reporting period remained incarcerated. Many of them were held in military prisons for not having performed required national military service but most for simply belonging to unregistered religious groups. Many were held for not belonging to any specific religious group and were told they would be released after joining one of the four approved 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." (ibid)

The September 2008 *United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report* for Eritrea states:

"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." (United States Department of State (19 September 2008) *Eritrea: International Religious Freedom Report – 2008*)

Under the heading “Evangelicals’ Churches”, the September 2008 *United Kingdom Home Office Country of Origin Information Report* for Eritrea, states:

“General information

21.32 The term ‘Pentes’ originates in Ethiopia, and is held to be a pejorative term originating from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church’s distrust of Pentecostal churches and their practices (African Christianity) [82a] (p2), and in African Christianity’s account, “... a testimony to the influence of the Pentecostal movement on Ethiopian Protestantism...”

See menfesawyan

21.33 There is information on the practices of Pentes groups in Ethiopia on the webpage of Jörg Haustein, a theologian specialising in the Pentecostal churches, based at the University of Heidelberg, at <http://www.glopent.net/Members/jhaustein/ethiopia/pentecostal-and-charismatic-movements> African Christianity website continues that in Ethiopia:

“The Mulu Wengel (Full Gospel) church grew out of the Heavenly Sunshine Bible study, begun by a group of high school students learning English and a Mennonite doctor, though it was also decisively influenced by the teachings of the Finnish Pentecostal Mission, and has never had formal connections with any western mission. Meserete Kristos [another church] followed Mulu Wengel’s lead in cultivating the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit... Both Meserete Kristos and Mulu Wengel churches practice faith healing, exorcism of demons, and glossolalia”.

21.34 There is no information that these practices are practiced in the churches of the same names in Eritrea, though Abbebe Kileyesus’s article below claims there are similarities. Information from the AI December 2005 report shows similar societal prejudices against evangelical churches:

“Since then [May 2002], there has been a rapid growth of evangelical churches in Eritrea. This has often been a source of tension between them and the three main Christian churches, which were losing members to them. They had different doctrines, forms of worship and weddings, and ‘fellowship’ for prayer and study. They often proselytized (sought converts) or expressed their faith in new, ‘charismatic’ ways in public places, which attracted some disapproval from members of the main religious groups - Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran and Islam.” [51] (p8)

21.35 An article by Abbebe Kileyesus, entitled “Cosmologies in collision: Pentecostal conversion and Christian cults in Asmara”, that was published in the April 2006 edition of *African Studies Review*, examined Eritrean Pentecostalism as a religious phenomenon. Kileyesus notes that the Asmara Pentecostal community displays similar traits to the Ethiopian churches, stating:

“Although the nature of Asmara Pentecostal public space is increasingly defined by Bible reading and group networking on a mass scale, Pentecostal evangelism in Asmara is also navigated increasingly through audio and videotapes as well as printed tracts. ...The media, both print and electronic,

and usually in the Tigrinya language, play a central role in this new wave of Pentecostal proselytization or evangelization, in the consolidation of the congregation, and in the creation of a distinct group of born-again who are different from all others.”

21.36 Kileyesus argues in the article that “aims to contribute to a better understanding of the popularity of Pentecostalism and the formation of religious identity in an Eritrean city”, that Asmara has seen the growth of Pentecostal movements as being in competition with traditional Christian groups in Eritrea, particularly the Eritrean Orthodox Church, against a background of “rapid socioeconomic change”. Pentecostal Christians are characterised as young, ambitious urbanites who seek prosperity over adherence to the traditional controls of the Orthodox Church. Difficulties with secular authorities are restricted in the article to Pentecostal opposition to the Ethiopian Derg rule prior to Eritrea’s independence in 1993. The date of the actual research is unclear from the article, possibly reflecting practice prior to September 2001.

21.37 One article, posted on Mission Network News website, talks of evangelical Christians targeted by the Eritrean authorities as ‘menfesawyan’ which translates into English as ‘spirituals’ and equates to practitioners identified as charismatic Christians. The term menfesawyan more accurately describes targeted Christians than Pentecostals, encompassing revival movements that span all Christian denominations, including accepted, registered, unregistered and banned groups.

21.38 With regards to the number of unregistered Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Eritrea, Human Rights Without Frontiers stated in a 26 November 2003 report that there were 12 independent churches so regarded by the Government in 2002; by 2005, “at least 36 evangelical and Pentecostal churches” was the AI December 2005 estimate. Kileyesus, in “cosmologies in collision”, April 2006, estimates that there are six main different ‘branches’ operating in Asmara – Mulu Wangel [Mulu Wengel], Kale Hiwat, Meserete Kristos, Rhema, Charisma, and Hallelujah – and that “Today there are around twelve thousand active participants, another two or three thousand Sunday service worshipers, and some two thousand Otaba (Orthodox Tawahdo Bétakərəstiyān) church members who take part in Pentecostal services occasionally.”

21.39 Release Eritrea notes in a 17 December 2004 posting that: “Some of these churches [all evangelical and Pentecostal required by the Government to re-register their churches in May 2002] are historically linked with the worldwide Protestant denominations, such as the Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Baptists, Mennonites, Methodists. Others are indigenous churches, which are not linked to international Protestant denominations, including the Rhema church, the Hallelujah church, the New Covenant church, the Philadelphia church, etc.”

21.40 The USIRF report for 2007 states “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.” BBC News has reported that: “During the past five years, a brutal campaign has been waged in Eritrea against Christian minorities, focusing mainly on the evangelical and Pentecostal movements. Weddings, baptisms, church services and prayer meetings have been raided by security forces. Guests or

congregation members have [been] rounded up and detained en masse.” (United Kingdom Home Office (13 September 2008) *Country of Origin Information Report - Eritrea*)

Paragraph 21.03 of the same report adds:

“21.03 The UNHCR position paper of January 2004 (confirmed by UNHCR in August 2005 to still be their position, and repeated by AI in the December 2005 report) summarises the ban and initial period of the government action, citing the USSD report for 2002 and AI reports for 2003:

‘In May 2002, the government reportedly ordered several minority churches, referred collectively as the ‘Pentes’ (including Born Again Christians, Pentecostals, Full Gospel and other small protestant groups) to close down. They were required to register with the new Department of Religious Affairs and receive authorization to reopen. Although the churches reportedly complied with the registration requirements, which included providing extensive details of members and funds, and were informally allowed to continue to worship, none of them were known to have been officially registered by 19 September 2003.’ (Ibid)

Under the heading ‘Religious Persecution’, the January 2009 *Human Rights Watch World Report*, states:

“Members of unregistered churches, especially Protestant sects, are persecuted. Over 3,000 members of unregistered churches are incarcerated. Many are beaten and otherwise abused to compel them to renounce their faiths. Some are released after a month or two, but others are held indefinitely. Youths who protested confiscation of religious books at a military training school in 2008 were locked into shipping containers.

‘Recognized’ religious groups have not been spared. In 2006 the government removed the 81-year-old patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church after he refused to interfere with a renewal movement within the church. He has been in solitary confinement since May 2007. Members of the renewal movement have been arrested and abused in the same fashion as members of non-recognized churches. In 2008 the regime revoked the exemption from military service of most Orthodox priests.’ (Human Rights Watch (January 2009) *World Report 2009 – Eritrea*)

The March 2009 *United Kingdom Home Office Operational Guidance Note for Eritrea*, states:

“Most Eritreans make an asylum and/or human rights claim based on alleged state mistreatment on account of them being Pentecostals.

3.6.2 Treatment. The as yet unimplemented constitution provides for freedom of religion, however, in practice the Government severely restricts this right for all but the four sanctioned religious groups – Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Catholics and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation).⁹ Although there is no state religion, the government has close ties to the Orthodox Church and is suspicious of newer

denominations not traditional to Eritrea. For the past five years, a campaign by the government against Christian minorities has focussed mainly on the evangelical and pentecostal movements.

3.6.3 In May 2002, the government ordered several minority churches referred collectively as the Pentes (including Born Again Christians, Pentecostals, Full Gospel and other small protestant groups) to close down. These churches were required to register with the Department of Religious Affairs in order to reopen. Although the churches were reported to have complied with the requirement and were informally allowed to continue to worship, none of them were known to have been officially registered by 19 September 2008. Government spokesmen have since cited Pentecostals, along with extremist Islamic groups, as threats to national security.

3.6.4 During 2008, the authorities reportedly detained at least 125 members various unregistered churches. Numerous detainees were required to sign statements as a condition of their release repudiating their faith and there were continued reports that relatives were asked to sign for detainees who refused to sign such documents. There were also reports that many of those held were detained for failure to complete military service but significant numbers were held solely for belonging to unregistered religious groups. Some detainees were released after detentions of several days or less while others spent longer periods in confinement without charges or access to legal counsel or their families. Government restrictions made it difficult to determine the precise number of religious prisoners at any one time and release sometimes went unreported. However, the number of long term prisoners was reported to grow. As at September 2008, more than 3,225 Christians from unregistered groups were detained in prison. These reports included 37 leaders and Pastors of Pentecostal churches in detention, some for more than 3 years without due process.

3.6.5 The Eritrean government's denials and assurances about its treatment of minority religious groups have not been sufficient to convince advocates of religious freedom elsewhere in the world that their actions are reasonable. In November 2006, the US Secretary of State redesignated the country a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom." (United Kingdom Home Office (March 2009) *Operational Guidance Note - Eritrea*)

A January 2008 *Voice of the Martyrs* news story states:

"According to a January 27 report from Gulf Information Center, 30 Christian youth belonging to the Pentecostal Church in the Red Sea port city of Massawa were arrested by the Eritrean government last week. The report also indicated that the campaign to arrest Christians had spread to several other cities, including the capital city of Asmara, where detainees were being forced under torture to reveal names of other believers." (Voice of the Martyrs (30 January 2008) *Christians Arrested in Massawa, Eritrea*)

A January 2009 *Release International* report continues:

"Eritrean police have launched raids against Christians across the country, rounding up more than 100 men, women and children. If you lived in Eritrea,

the chances are you would be sharing a cell with some of them. Baptists are banned.

If they caught you worshipping illegally you could face torture to try to make you renounce your faith. Refugees have shown Release International their scars. The mass arrests, over November and December, have swollen the prison population of believers in this Horn of Africa nation to more than 2000.” (Release International (UK) (14 January 2009) *In the Land where Baptists are Banned*)

An August 2008 *Compass Direct* report states:

“Authorities on Tuesday (August 5) locked up eight high school students at a military training school in metal shipping containers for objecting to the burning of hundreds of Bibles, sources told *Compass*.

The eight male students from the Sawa Defense Training Centre in Sawa, near Eritrea's border with Sudan, were incarcerated after military authorities confiscated more than 1,500 personal Bibles from new students arriving for the 2008-2009 academic year.

The eight students objected when military officials began burning the Bibles.

‘During the time that the Bibles were set on fire, the chief commander of Sawa, Col. Debesai Ghide, gave a warning to all the students by telling them that Sawa is a place of patriotism, not a place for “Pentes” [Pentecostals],’ said one source. ‘Eight male students to whom God gave boldness to speak against the burning of the Bibles have been taken into custody in one of the metal shipping containers that the military at Sawa uses as prison cells for Christians who have been found practicing their faith in the center.’

Reading the Bible privately, discussing Christian faith with other students, praying before or after meals alone or in groups and possessing the Bible or any other Christian literature is forbidden at the center, the source said. Students involved in such activities are liable to imprisonment and severe military punishment.” (Compass Direct (USA) (11 August 2008) *Eritrea Shuts Christian Students into Shipping Containers*)

The same report continues:

“More than 2,000 Christians, including pastors and priests from both Protestant and Orthodox churches, are now under arrest in police stations, military camps and jails all across Eritrea because of their religious beliefs. Although many have been incarcerated for months or even years, none have been charged officially or given access to judicial process.

In December 2006 the government of Eritrea wrested control of finances and personnel from the Eritrean Orthodox Church. The church has been under de facto government control since Patriarch Abune Antonios was placed under house arrest and then divested of his ecclesiastical authority in August 2005.” (ibid)

A February 2008 report from *BosNewsLife News Agency* adds:

"An influential independent Christian rights group confirmed late Wednesday, February 27, that Eritrea has released dozens of evangelical Christians, but warned that some 2,000 other believers remain imprisoned in the African nation "due to their faith in Christ."

US-based International Christian Concern (ICC), with Website www.persecution.org, told BosNewsLife that Eritrean officials released 35 men, women and children belonging to the underground Faith Missions Church on February 16, shortly after it reported on their plight earlier this month. They are believed to be the same group of people BosNewsLife cited in a February 14 report. In that report the Faith Missions Church was described as the Faith of Christ Church.

Eritrean officials also released at least 10 Christians who were imprisoned in the port city of Assab for nearly six years, ICC and other sources have said. The Christians belong to Mulu Wongel, Kale Hiwot and Rema evangelical churches, ICC added. However an unspecified number of Christians from Faith Mission Church, who were also recently imprisoned in the city of Agordat, remain behind bars, the group stressed.

Faith Missions is a small Evangelical denomination in Eritrea. It has been in existence in the country since the early 1950s. Besides engaging in evangelistic activities, the church formerly ran orphanages and schools throughout the country. Eritrean officials closed the church in May 2002, 'forcing it to go underground,' ICC confirmed. 'Recently, the government of Eritrea has targeted adherents of this denomination with particular severity.'" (BosNewsLife News Agency (Hungary) (27 February 2008) *Eritrea Releases Christian Prisoners; Torture Continues Elsewhere*)

A September 2007 *BBC News* article reports:

"During the past five years, a brutal campaign has been waged in Eritrea against Christian minorities, focusing mainly on the evangelical and Pentecostal movements. Weddings, baptisms, church services and prayer meetings have been raided by security forces. Guests or congregation members have rounded up and detained en masse.

According to Compass Direct, a non-governmental organisation reporting on the persecution of Christians around the world, it is estimated that almost 2,000 people are being held in jails across Eritrea because of their religious beliefs.

The crackdown on Eritrea's minority churches followed a government announcement in May 2002 that only its four oldest faiths - Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran and Islam - would receive official sanction.

The rest were invited to register and declare their sources of funding. To date, none has been registered.

Evangelical Christians who have been arrested face severe pressure to recant their faith. Some prisoners have been held in metal shipping containers.

Accounts of torture, lack of food and terrible conditions are commonplace.”
(BBC News (27 September 2007) *Eritrean Christians tell of torture*)

The May 2009 *Amnesty International* Annual Report for Eritrea, states:

”More than 2,000 members of unregistered minority religions, including Pentecostal and evangelical denominations, which were banned by the government in 2002, remained in incommunicado detention without charge or trial. Many were arrested in 2008. Some government critics from registered religions, including Islam and the Eritrean Orthodox Church, also remained in detention. Amnesty International considers all who are detained solely on the basis of their religious affiliation or practice prisoners of conscience.”
(Amnesty International (28 May 2009) *Amnesty International Report 2009 – Eritrea*)

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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