



Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note

Eritrea: Religious groups

Version 3.0

February 2018

Preface

This note provides country of origin information (COI) and policy guidance to Home Office decision makers on handling particular types of protection and human rights claims. This includes whether claims are likely to justify the granting of asylum, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave and whether – in the event of a claim being refused – it is likely to be certifiable as ‘clearly unfounded’ under s94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

Decision makers must consider claims on an individual basis, taking into account the case specific facts and all relevant evidence, including: the policy guidance contained with this note; the available COI; any applicable caselaw; and the Home Office casework guidance in relation to relevant policies.

Country information

COI in this note has been researched in accordance with principles set out in the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#) and the [European Asylum Support Office’s research guidelines, Country of Origin Information report methodology](#), namely taking into account its relevance, reliability, accuracy, objectivity, currency, transparency and traceability.

All information is carefully selected from generally reliable, publicly accessible sources or is information that can be made publicly available. Full publication details of supporting documentation are provided in footnotes. Multiple sourcing is normally used to ensure that the information is accurate, balanced and corroborated, and that a comprehensive and up-to-date picture at the time of publication is provided. Information is compared and contrasted, whenever possible, to provide a range of views and opinions. The inclusion of a source is not an endorsement of it or any views expressed.

Feedback

Our goal is to continuously improve our material. Therefore, if you would like to comment on this note, please email the [Country Policy and Information Team](#).

Independent Advisory Group on Country Information

The Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI) was set up in March 2009 by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to make recommendations to him about the content of the Home Office’s COI material. The IAGCI welcomes feedback on the Home Office’s COI material. It is not the function of the IAGCI to endorse any Home Office material, procedures or policy. IAGCI may be contacted at:

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Information about the IAGCI’s work and a list of the COI documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector’s website at <http://icinspector.independent.gov.uk/country-information-reviews/>

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Policy guidance

Updated: 7 February 2018

1. Introduction

1.1 Basis of claim

- 1.1.1 Fear of persecution or serious harm by the state because of a person's religious faith or membership of a religious group.

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2. Consideration of issues

2.1 Credibility

- 2.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).
- 2.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the [Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants](#)).
- 2.1.3 Decision makers should also consider the need to conduct language analysis testing (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)).

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2.2 Assessment of risk

- 2.2.1 While there are no reliable data on religious affiliation, the population is estimated to be between 48-63% Christian and 37-50% Muslim (see [Religious demography](#)).
- 2.2.2 The government recognises four officially registered religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (see [Government regulations and restrictions](#)).
- 2.2.3 Religious groups not registered with the government include Evangelicals, Baptists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists and the Bahai. Unregistered religious groups comprise a small minority of the population (see [Religious demography](#) and [Treatment of unregistered groups](#)).
 - a. Registered religious groups
- 2.2.4 Most of the Eritrean population belong to the four registered religious groups. Members of the registered religious groups can generally worship openly and freely provided they comply with the government's directives and regulations that relate to religious activities (see [Treatment of registered religious groups](#)).
- 2.2.5 However, persons who have disobeyed government directives and regulations, or who have openly opposed government interference in the internal affairs of their religious groups, irrespective of their position in the

religious organisation, have experienced arrest and detention (see [Treatment of registered religious groups](#)).

- 2.2.6 In general, members of the four registered groups are not at risk of persecution or serious harm from the state. The onus will be on the person to demonstrate that they have acted contrary to government directives and regulations, and this has come to the adverse attention of the authorities. Where they have, such treatment is likely to amount to persecution or serious harm by its nature and repetition.

b. **Unregistered religious groups**

- 2.2.7 The government has banned religious activities of the unregistered groups and closed their places of worship. These groups and their members have experienced restrictions on freedom of movement, deprivation of citizenship (in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses), arbitrary arrests and detention without charge or due process (see [Treatment of unregistered groups](#)).
- 2.2.8 Members of unregistered religious groups who worship openly are likely to face treatment that, by its nature and repetition, is likely to amount to serious harm or persecution (see [Treatment of unregistered groups](#)).
- 2.2.9 For guidance on assessing risk, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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2.3 **Protection**

- 2.3.1 As the person fears persecution or serious harm by the state, they will not be able to avail themselves of the protection of the authorities.
- 2.3.2 For guidance on assessing protection generally, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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2.4 **Internal relocation**

- 2.4.1 As the person fears persecution or serious harm by the state, they will not be able to relocate to escape that risk.
- 2.4.2 For further guidance on assessing the availability of state protection, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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2.5 **Certification**

- 2.5.1 Where a claim is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.
- 2.5.2 For further information on certification, see the [Certification of protection and human rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 \(clearly unfounded claims\)](#).

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3. Religious demography

3.1.1 The United States State Department (USSD) 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016' (IRFR), published on 15 August 2017, stated:

'The Eritrean government estimates the population at 3.5 million. There are no reliable figures on religious affiliation. Government, religious, and local UN sources estimate the population is approximately 48-50 percent Christian and 48-50 percent Sunni Muslim. The Christian population is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox. Catholics, Protestants, and other Christian denominations including the Greek Orthodox Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals, total less than 5 percent of the Christians. Some estimates suggest approximately 2 percent of the population is animist, and there is a small Bahai community of approximately 300 members. There is a very small Jewish community.'

¹

3.1.2 The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) '2017 Annual Report', published on 26 April 2017, stated: 'There are no reliable statistics of religious affiliation in Eritrea. The Pew Research Center estimates that Christians comprise approximately 63 percent of the population and Muslims approximately 37 percent.'

²

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4. Government regulations and restrictions

4.1.1 The USCIRF '2017 Annual Report' stated: 'There are very few legal protections for freedom of religion or belief in Eritrea. Those that do exist are either not implemented or are limited by other laws or in practice. The Eritrean constitution provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief; guarantees the right to practice and manifest any religion; and prohibits religious discrimination. Nevertheless, the constitution has not been implemented since its ratification in 1997.'

³

4.1.2 The Detailed findings of the [United Nations] commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea' ('the UNCOI'), dated 8 June 2016, stated:

'A 1995 decree on religious institutions emphasises that "religions and religious institutions must not undertake any political activities against the government [or comment] on any political issue." The decree additionally prohibits religious groups from initiating or offering social services,

¹ United States State Department (USSD), 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016' (IRFR), Eritrea, section 1 – Religious Demography, 15 August 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268890.pdf>. Accessed: 5 October 2017

² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, '2017 Annual Report', Eritrea, 26 April 2017, http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017%20USCIRFAnnual_Eritrea.pdf. Accessed: 19 December 2017

³ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, '2017 Annual Report', Eritrea, 26 April 2017, http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017%20USCIRFAnnual_Eritrea.pdf. Accessed: 10 October 2017

development programmes and charitable assistance...In 2002, the Government issued a decree requiring that all religious groups register or cease their religious activities...' ⁴

4.1.3 The USCIRF '2017 Annual Report' stated:

'In 2002, the government imposed a registration requirement on all religious groups other than the four officially recognized religions: the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea; Sunni Islam; the Roman Catholic Church; and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea, a Lutheran-affiliated denomination. All other religious communities are required to apply annually for registration with the Office of Religious Affairs...

'To date, no other religious communities have been registered. The Baha'i community, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, and the Seventh-day Adventists submitted the required applications in 2002; however, the Eritrean government has yet to act on their applications. The government's inaction means that unregistered religious communities lack a legal basis on which to practice their faiths, including holding services or other religious ceremonies. According to the [United Nations] COI-E report and Eritrean refugees interviewed by USCIRF, most churches of nonregistered religious communities are closed and government approval is required to build houses of worship. Leaders and members of unregistered communities that continue to practice their faith are punished with imprisonment and fines.' ⁵

4.1.4 The USSD IRFR for 2016 stated:

'The law and unimplemented constitution prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the freedom to practice any religion.

'A longstanding proclamation requires religious groups to register with the government or cease activities. Members of religious groups that are unregistered or otherwise not in compliance with the law are subject to penalties under the provisional penal code. Such penalties may include fines and prison terms. The Office of Religious Affairs has authority to regulate religious activities and institutions, including approval of the applications of religious groups seeking official recognition. Each application must include a description of the religious group's history in the country, an explanation of the uniqueness or benefit the group offers compared with other religious groups, names and personal information of the group's leaders, detailed information on assets, a description of the group's conformity to local culture, and a declaration of all foreign sources of funding.

'The government has registered and recognizes four religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and

⁴ United Nations Commission of Inquiry, 'Detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea', 8 June 2016 (paras 286-288), http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A_HRC_32_CRP.1_read-only.pdf. Accessed: 31 October 2017

⁵ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, '2017 Annual Report', Eritrea, 26 April 2017, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017%20USCIRFAnnual_Eritrea.pdf. Accessed: 18 December 2017

the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. It also appoints the heads of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Sunni Islamic community.’⁶

4.1.5 The USSD IRFR for 2016 also stated:

‘Groups must renew their registration every year. In 2002, the minister of information issued a decree requiring all religious groups, except the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation), to submit registration applications and cease religious activities and services until these applications were approved. Since 2002, the government has not approved the registration of additional religious groups; information on how many registrations are pending is not available.’⁷

4.1.6 The USSD IRFR for 2016 further stated:

‘The law does not provide for conscientious objector status for religious reasons, nor are there alternative activities for persons willing to perform national service but unwilling to engage in military or militia activities.

‘The law prohibits any involvement in politics by religious groups and prohibits religiously affiliated media outlets from commenting on political matters.

‘All citizens must obtain an exit visa prior to departure. The application requests the applicant’s religious affiliation, but the law does not require that information.’⁸

See also the country policy and information note on [Eritrea: National service and illegal exit](#).

4.1.7 The USCIRF ‘2017 Annual Report’ also stated:

‘The Eritrean government also strictly controls the activities of the four recognized religious communities: the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea; Sunni Islam; the Roman Catholic Church; and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. These groups are required to submit activity reports every six months, instructed not to accept funds from coreligionists abroad (an order with which the Eritrean Orthodox Church reportedly said it would not comply), and have had religious leaders appointed by government officials. There also are reports of government surveillance of services of the four official religions...’⁹

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⁶ USSD, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2016’, Eritrea, Section II Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom, 15 August 2017,

<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268890.pdf>. Accessed: 5 October 2017

⁷ USSD, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2016’, Eritrea, Section II Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom, 15 August 2017,

<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268890.pdf>. Accessed: 5 October 2017

⁸ USSD, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2016’, Eritrea, Section II Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom, 15 August 2017,

<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268890.pdf>. Accessed: 31 October 2017

⁹ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, ‘2017 Annual Report’, Eritrea, 26 April 2017, http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017%20USCIRFAnnual_Eritrea.pdf. Accessed: 10 October 2017

5. Treatment of registered religious groups

5.1 General

- 5.1.1 The USSD IRFR for 2016 noted: ‘The leaders of the four recognized religious groups stated that their officially registered members did not face impediments to religious practice.’¹⁰
- 5.1.2 The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) ‘Country Information Report – Eritrea’, dated 8 February 2017, stated: ‘DFAT assesses that ordinary members of registered religions are generally able to practice their faith freely. However, those who protest government interference in the running of their religious organisation’s affairs face a high risk of imprisonment, regardless of whether they hold a leadership position or are an ordinary member.’¹¹

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5.2 Eritrean Orthodox Church

- 5.2.1 The USCIRF ‘2017 Annual Report’ stated:
‘The Eritrean government has appointed the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Mufti of the Eritrean Muslim community, as well as other lower-level religious officials...The government-deposed Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios, who protested government interference in his church’s affairs, has been held under house arrest since 2006. In April 2016, Eritrean authorities arrested 10 Orthodox priests who asked for the release of Patriarch Antonios. On August 8, 2016, the Eritrean Orthodox Church’s website published pictures of Patriarch Antonios at the Patriarchate in Asmara and his purported letter of apology; however, other Orthodox officials deny that Patriarch Antonios wrote the letter and assert that the August 8 meeting was part of a recently begun reconciliation process.’¹²
- 5.2.2 The USSD IRFR for 2016 stated: ‘Some Eritrean Orthodox clergy operating outside the country said the government sought to control Eritrean Orthodox churches in foreign countries. Authorities reportedly pressured one such overseas Eritrean Orthodox church to send money to the government or risk preventing church members from visiting relatives in Eritrea and potential seizure of assets held by the church members in the country.’¹³

¹⁰ USSD, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2016’, Eritrea, Section II Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom, 15 August 2017,

<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268890.pdf>. Accessed: 31 October 2017

¹¹ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), ‘Eritrea – Country Information Report’, 8 February 2017, page 12,

<http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/country-information-report-eritrea.pdf>.

Accessed: 4 December 2017

¹² US Commission on International Religious Freedom, ‘2017 Annual Report’, Eritrea, 26 April 2017, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017%20USCIRFAnnual_Eritrea.pdf. Accessed: 10 October 2017

¹³ USSD, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2016’, Eritrea, Section II Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom, 15 August 2017,

<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268890.pdf>. Accessed: 11 October 2017

5.2.3 A Christian Solidarity Worldwide report, 'Eritrean Patriarch participates in Sunday Mass', dated 17 July 2017, stated:

'Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has confirmed that on 16 July [2017], the legitimate patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, who has been under house arrest since 2007, participated in a Mass held at St Mary's Cathedral in Asmara.

'The Mass was attended by hundreds of worshippers and was the patriarch's first public appearance in over a decade. Sources close to CSW have described it as "a profound answer to many prayers and much pressure." However, while delighted, CSW's sources sounded a note of caution regarding the need to clarify whether the patriarch had been released temporarily or conditionally.

'CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "It is encouraging to hear that Patriarch Antonios was able to participate in a Mass after a decade of incommunicado incarceration. We await clarification regarding the terms of his release, and our profound hope is that the patriarch is finally free and will be reinstated unconditionally. We also remember the tens of thousands of prisoners of conscience of all faiths and none still languishing in indefinite detention in Eritrea, including the four Orthodox priests and eight Protestant leaders, and reiterate our call for their immediate and unconditional release."'

¹⁴

5.2.4 Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported in December 2017 that: 'There has been no significant improvement in the circumstances of the detained head of the Eritrean Tewahdo Orthodox Church, despite official attempts to give the impression of progress.' ¹⁵

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5.3 Roman Catholic Church

5.3.1 The USSD IRFR for 2016 stated:

'The government sometimes granted visas permitting Catholic dioceses to host visiting clergy from Rome or other foreign locations. Catholic clergy were permitted to travel abroad for religious purposes and training, although not in numbers Church officials considered adequate; they were discouraged from attending certain events while overseas. Students attending the Roman Catholic seminary as well as Catholic nuns did not perform national service and did not suffer repercussions from the government, according to Church officials. Some religious leaders stated, however, that national service requirements prevented adequate numbers of seminarians from completing theological training in Rome or other locations, because those who had not completed national service were not able to obtain passports or exit visas.' ¹⁶

¹⁴ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 'Eritrean Patriarch participates in Sunday Mass', 17 July 2017, <http://www.csw.org.uk/2017/07/17/news/3636/article.htm>. Accessed: 7 February 2018

¹⁵ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 'No improvement for detained Eritrean Patriarch', 7 December 2017, <http://www.csw.org.uk/2017/12/07/news/3796/article.htm>. Accessed: 7 January 2018

¹⁶ USSD, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016', Eritrea, Government practices, 15 August 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268890.pdf>. Accessed: 11 October 2017

- 5.3.2 The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ‘2017 Annual Report’ stated: ‘The Catholic Church is granted a few more – but still restricted – freedoms than other religious communities, including the permission to host some visiting clergy, to receive funding from the Holy See, to travel for religious purposes and training in small numbers, and to receive exemptions from national service for seminar students and nuns.’¹⁷

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5.4 Islamic faith

- 5.4.1 The USSD IRFR for 2016 stated:

‘The government continued to permit a limited number of Sunni Muslims, mainly the elderly and those not fit for military service, to take part in the Hajj, travel abroad for religious study, and host clerics from abroad. The government generally did not permit Muslim groups to receive funding from governments of nations where Islam was the dominant religion on grounds that such funding threatened to import foreign “fundamentalist” or “extremist” tendencies.’¹⁸

- 5.4.2 A BBC News report, ‘Eritrea’s Asmara city hit by rare student protest’, dated 1 November 2017, reported on an incident of government interference in the affairs of an Islamic school:

‘Rare protests broke out in Eritrea’s capital, Asmara, with reports of shooting in the city on Tuesday.

‘Security forces responded by firing shots to disperse protesters, unverified video footage widely circulated on social media shows.

‘The protests were staged by students who were angered by government interference in the affairs of a community-funded Muslim school...

‘The protests were staged by students of Diae Al Islam, one of the best private schools in Asmara, following reports that its chairman, 90-year-old Hajj Musa Mohammed Nur, and other members of the school board were arrested after fiercely resisting government efforts to regulate the school.

‘According to a video circulating on social media that appears to show Mr Musa speaking before his arrest, he said that the authorities had demanded that the school, which offers both secular and Islamic education, drop religious teachings, ban the hijab and stop the separation of sexes.’¹⁹

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¹⁷ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, ‘2017 Annual Report’, Eritrea, 26 April 2017, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017%20USCIRFAnnual_Eritrea.pdf. Accessed: 11 October 2017

¹⁸ USSD, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2016’, Eritrea, Government practices, 15 August 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268890.pdf>. Accessed: 11 October 2017

¹⁹ BBC News, ‘Eritrea’s Asmara city hit by rare student protest’, 1 November 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-41832105>. Accessed: 18 December 2017

6. Treatment of unregistered religious groups

6.1 General

6.1.1 The USCIRF report 2017 noted:

'Reports of torture and other abuses of religious prisoners continue. While the country's closed nature makes exact numbers difficult to determine, the State Department reports 1,200 to 3,000 persons are imprisoned on religious grounds in Eritrea. During the reporting period, there were reported incidents of new arrests. The vast majority of religious prisoners of conscience are members of unregistered churches arrested for participating in religious services or ceremonies. Religious prisoners are sent routinely to the harshest prisons and receive some of the cruelest punishments. Released religious prisoners have reported that they were kept in solitary confinement or crowded conditions, such as in 20-foot metal shipping containers or underground barracks, and subjected to extreme temperature fluctuations. In addition, there have been reports of deaths of religious prisoners due to harsh treatment or denial of medical care. Persons detained for religious activities, in both short-term and long-term detentions, are not formally charged, permitted access to legal counsel, accorded due process, or allowed family visits. Prisoners are not permitted to pray aloud, sing, or preach, and religious books are banned. Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses released from prison report being pressured to recant their faith, forced to sign statements that they would no longer gather to worship, and warned not to re-engage in religious activities.'²⁰

6.1.2 The USSD IRFR for 2016 noted:

'Government secrecy and intimidation of sources made it impossible to determine the precise number of those imprisoned because of their religious beliefs. Releases and arrests often went unreported. Information from outside the capital was extremely limited. Independent observers noted that many people remained imprisoned with no charges.

'International religious organizations reported that authorities interrogated detainees about their religious affiliation and asked them to identify members of unregistered religious groups.'²¹

6.1.3 The February 2017 DFAT Country Report noted:

'Unregistered religious communities lack a legal basis on which to practice their faiths, including holding services or other religious ceremonies. Most houses of worship of non-registered religious communities have reportedly been closed, while government approval is required to build any new religious venue. Leaders and members of unregistered communities that continue to practice their faith, including through holding a joint prayer session at home, or attending a wedding or funeral, are at risk of arrest...

²⁰ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, '2017 Annual Report', Eritrea, 26 April 2017, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017%20USCIRFAnnual_Eritrea.pdf. Accessed: 10 October 2017

²¹ USSD, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016', Eritrea, Government practices, 15 August 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268890.pdf>. Accessed: 11 October 2017

'DFAT assesses that members of unregistered religious communities face a high risk of official discrimination in Eritrea, as they are unable to practice their faith freely.' ²²

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6.2 Jehovah's Witnesses

6.2.1 The USCIRF '2017 Annual Report' stated:

'Jehovah's Witnesses are persecuted for their political neutrality and conscientious objection to military service, which are aspects of their faith. On October 25, 1994 President Afwerki issued a decree revoking Jehovah's Witnesses' citizenship for their refusal to take part in the referendum on independence or to participate in national service. Since 1994, Jehovah's Witnesses have been barred from obtaining government-issued identity and travel documents, government jobs, and business licenses. Eritrean identity cards are required for legal recognition of marriages or land purchases. The State Department has reported that some local authorities have denied water and gas services to Jehovah's Witnesses.

'Jehovah's Witnesses who have refused to serve in the military have been imprisoned without trial, some for over a decade, including Paulos Eyassu, Issac Mogos, and Negede Teklemariam, who have been detained in Sawa Prison since September 24, 1994. Moreover, the government's requirement that high school students complete their final year at the Sawa Training and Education Camp, which includes six months of military training, effectively denies Jehovah's Witnesses an opportunity to attend their last year of high school and graduate because their faith prohibits them from participating in the military training. Some children of Jehovah's Witnesses have been expelled from school because of their refusal to salute the flag or to pay for membership in the officially sanctioned national organization for youth and students.

'Whole congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses have been arrested while attending worship services in homes or in rented facilities, and individual Witnesses are arrested regularly and imprisoned for expressing their faith to others. Some are released quickly, while others are held indefinitely without charges. As of December 2016, the Eritrean government held in detention 54 Jehovah's Witnesses without charge...The majority of detainees were arrested for participating in religious meetings or for conscientious objection.'

²³

6.2.2 The USSD IRFR for 2016 stated:

'Jehovah's Witnesses, who were stripped of citizenship in 1994 due to their refusal to vote, were unable to obtain official identification documents as in

²² Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 'Country Information Report - Eritrea', pages 11-12, 8 February 2017, <http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/country-information-report-eritrea.pdf>. Accessed: 18 December 2017

²³ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, '2017 Annual Report', Eritrea, 26 April 2017, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017%20USCIRFAnnual_Eritrea.pdf. Accessed: 10 October 2017

previous years. The government did not recognize a right to conscientious objection to military service, continued to single out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment such as arrest and detention, and denied them the opportunity to obtain a national identity card required for most forms of employment, government benefits, and travel.' ²⁴

6.2.3 The USSD 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016' further stated:

'The government continued to consider Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious prisoners as being held for their religious affiliation or for national security reasons. Prisoners held for national security reasons were not allowed visitors, and families often did not know where they were being held. Authorities generally permitted family members to visit prisoners detained for religious reasons only. Released prisoners who had been held for their religious beliefs reported harsh detention conditions, including solitary confinement, physical abuse, and inadequate food, water, and shelter.' ²⁵

6.2.4 The Jehovah's Witnesses organisation website, on 7 November 2017, stated:

'It is in Eritrea, more than anywhere else in the world, that Jehovah's Witnesses experience the most intense persecution. Since Eritrea gained independence in 1993, the Witnesses have been consistently imprisoned, tortured, and marginalized. They are persecuted because they remain politically neutral and refuse to take up arms against their fellow man.

'Fifty-four of Jehovah's Witnesses are currently imprisoned in Eritrea. Over the past 22 years, all except one have been held without formal charges or a hearing. Three have been in prison since 1994 for their conscientious objection to military service.' ²⁶

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6.3 Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians

6.3.1 The USCIRF '2017 Annual Report' stated:

'Pentecostals and Evangelicals comprise the majority of religious prisoners. The Eritrean government is suspicious of newer religious communities, in particular Protestant Evangelical and Pentecostal communities. It has characterized these groups as being part of a foreign campaign to infiltrate the country, engage in aggressive evangelism alien to Eritrea's cultural traditions, and cause social divisions. Several Evangelical and Pentecostal pastors have been detained for more than 10 years, including Southwest Full Gospel Church Founder and Pastor Kiflu Gebremeskel (since 2004), Massawa Rhema Church Pastor Million Gebreselasie (since 2004), Full Gospel Church Pastor Haile Naigzhi (since 2004), Kale Hiwot Church Pastor Ogbamichael

²⁴ USSD, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016', Eritrea, Executive Summary, 15 August 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268890.pdf>. Accessed: 11 October 2017

²⁵ USSD, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016', Government practices, 15 August 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268890.pdf>. Accessed: 11 October 2017

²⁶ Jehovah Witnesses.org, 'Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea Receives Unprecedented International Attention', 19 October 2016, <https://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/eritrea/persecution-of-jw-receives-international-attention/>. Accessed: 7 November 2017

Teklehaimanot (since 2005), and Full Gospel Church Pastor Kidane Weldou (since 2005).

'During 2016, security forces continued to arrest followers of these faiths for participating in clandestine prayer meetings and religious ceremonies, although toleration of these groups varied by location. The Eritrean government and Eritrean religious leaders do not publicize arrests and releases, and government secrecy and intimidation make documenting the exact numbers of such cases difficult. Nevertheless, USCIRF received confirmation of dozens more arrests in 2016. The State Department also has reported that some local authorities have denied water and gas services to Pentecostals.' ²⁷

6.3.2 The USSD IRFR for 2016 stated:

'Official attitudes toward members of unregistered religious groups worshipping in homes or rented facilities differed. Some local authorities tolerated the presence and activities of unregistered groups, while others attempted to prevent them from meeting. According to an NGO representative who spoke with refugees outside the country, members of some unregistered Christian groups continued to meet, worship, and evangelize despite the dangers. The refugee also reported that individuals known to be practicing Christians did not receive the water distributions when neighbors did, and that they did not receive special government coupons to purchase subsidized food as did others in their communities.' ²⁸

6.3.3 A 'Christian Today' report dated 27 June 2017, stated:

'Eritrea has embarked on periodic roundups of Christians, but what makes this different is that most are now being arrested in their homes, rather than at 'illegal' Bible studies or church services.

'Release [human rights charity] says that Eritrean Orthodox priests are accompanying security services, to ask people the religion they belong to. If any say they are Protestant, the security police ask them for confirmation certificate. This is given only to Lutheran members on the day of their confirmation. If they cannot produce the certificate to demonstrate they are Lutherans, a denomination that is sanction[ed] by the state, then they face arrest. Methodists, Baptists, Mennonites, Full Gospel and Pentecostal Christians are most at risk.' ²⁹

6.3.4 A 'WorldWatch Monitor' report, dated 26 May 2017 claimed 'The Eritrean government has stepped up its campaign against Christians, arresting almost 100 in the past month', adding 'The fresh wave of arrests took place earlier this month in the days leading up to Eritrea's Independence Day, 24 May. Many Christians find themselves under added scrutiny around the time of

²⁷ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, '2017 Annual Report', Eritrea, 26 April 2017, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017%20USCIRFAnnual_Eritrea.pdf. Accessed: 10 October 2017

²⁸ USSD, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016', Government practices, 15 August 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268890.pdf>. Accessed: 11 October 2017

²⁹ 'Christian Today', 'Eritrea launches new crackdown on Christians', 27 June 2017, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/eritrea.launches.new.crackdown.on.christians/110226.htm>. Accessed: 7 November 2017

Independence Day celebrations because they are reluctant to participate in ceremonies that go against their conscience.

'A source told World Watch that 49 Evangelicals were arrested outside the capital, Asmara, on Sunday (21 May) at a post-wedding celebration called a Hamauti...Negel and his wife, in their late 20s, were among those arrested.'³⁰

³⁰ WorldWatch Monitor, '100 Christians detained, 10 years after Eritrea put Patriarch under house arrest', 26 May 2017, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/100-christians-detained-10-years-after-eritrea-put-patriarch-under-house-arrest/>. Accessed: 7 November 2017

Version control and contacts

Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **3.0**
- valid from **7 February 2018**

Changes from last version of this note

Updated COI and changes to the wording in the policy and guidance section.

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