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ERITREA: About 400 individuals still detained for their faith (USCIRF)

About 400 individuals still detained for their faith, according to USCIRF

HRWF (27.08.2021) – Despite several collective releases in 2020 and 2021, about 400 Eritreans are still behind bars, according to the latest report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

According to July 2018 estimates by the US government, the

total population of Eritrea is six million. There are no reliable figures on religious affiliation, but it is estimated that 49% of the population are Christian and 49% are Sunni Muslim.

The country is ruled by a totalitarian one-party dictatorship of Maoist inspiration. Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991 after 30 years of continuous armed struggle by the Eritrean Liberation Front. Since then, national presidential or legislative elections have never taken place.

A number of beliefs and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses have been perceived negatively by the current government.

Jehovah's Witnesses are politically neutral and conscientiously cannot participate in military service. They refuse to kill or receive training on how to kill. Because they will not participate in compulsory military service, Eritrean authorities consider them to be opposed to the regime.

Additionally, Jehovah's Witnesses develop missionary activities in close social networks and hold religious meetings in private homes, which is illegal. Furthermore, Jehovah's Witnesses decline to participate in political elections.

By a presidential decree dated 25 October 1994, President Afewerki revoked citizenship for Jehovah's Witnesses because they did not participate in the 1993 independence referendum and they are conscientious objectors to military service. Prior to enforcing conscription, Eritrean authorities had

provided genuine alternatives with civilian service. Numerous Jehovah's Witnesses took part in these alternative options under different government administrations. The authorities systematically issued 'Certificates of Completed National Service' and often praised participants for their work. However, since this presidential decree, security forces have imprisoned, tortured, and harassed Jehovah's Witnesses in an effort to force them to renounce their faith.

HRWF Database of Faith Prisoners

As of August 2021, HRWF Database of prisoners contained documented cases of **29 prisoners**

Jehovah's Witnesses: 20

Protestants: 5

Oriental Orthodox: 4

Many more Protestants are in prison but details about their names, charges, sentences and numbers are not available due to the secrecy of the regime.

On 4 December, 26 male and 2 female Jehovah's Witnesses were set free after being imprisoned for their faith. They had spent between 5 and **26 years** in prison. Due to their release, the **number of Jehovah's Witnesses behind bars** dropped from 52 to 20 and this was the latest situation as of 25 August 2021. In almost all cases, they have been arrested and imprisoned without any formal criminal charges, trial or sentencing. Like many other prisoners, they have no legal recourse and so

cannot challenge their indefinite detention.

USCIRF Report

Press Release (19.08.2021) – On 19 August, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (**USCIRF**) released the following new country update highlighting religious freedom conditions in Eritrea:

Eritrea Country Update – This new report provides an update on religious freedom conditions in Eritrea, noting progress made and ongoing challenges in the country. The Eritrean government has eased some restrictions on the Baha'i and Jewish communities and has released some religious prisoners of conscience but has maintained government control of religion and mandatory military service. Moreover, the report discusses diplomatic relations between the United States and Eritrea and provides concrete recommendations for the U.S. government to help advance religious freedom in the country. This includes urging the release of all remaining religious prisoners, such as **Patriarch Abune Antonios**, as well as removing legal barriers to allow all Eritreans increased religious freedom.

In its **2021 Annual Report**, USCIRF recommended that the U.S State Department designate **Eritrea** as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. The Eritrea chapter is also available in **Tigrinya**.

Mandatory Military Service

The **law** requires all Eritreans between the ages of 18 and 50 to serve in the military for 18 months. Exemptions are given only to pregnant women and people with a physical disability. Eritrea's government imprisons those who refuse to serve, including on the basis of

their religious beliefs. It **requires** prisoners of conscience to renounce their religious affiliation in order to be released from prison.

Positive Developments

In 2020, Eritrean authorities set free over 240 religious prisoners and eased restrictions on the Baha'i community, the only remaining Jewish family, and the Greek Orthodox Church as well as other faith backgrounds. Some of these positive developments continued in 2021. For example, in February 2021, the Eritrean government released on bail more than 70 prisoners of conscience from different prisons. The government followed with the release of 21 prisoners, mostly women, in March and 36 people in April 2021. These steps were positive, but approximately 400 individuals are believed to still be detained due to their faith. International human rights organizations have called on Eritrea to continue to release all prisoners of conscience or grant them due process in a court of law.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While the U.S. government should welcome Eritrea's decisions to ease some restrictions on the Baha'i community and the Jewish family and to release religious prisoners, it should also continue to encourage Eritrean authorities to advance other religious freedom issues

in the country. This includes urging the release of all remaining religious prisoners as well as removing the legal barriers to allow all Eritreans full religious freedom. Finally, the U.S. government should continue to engage Eritrean officials through official congressional visits to encourage reforms that promote religious freedom.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been stripped of their citizenship, denied access to job opportunities and government benefits, and imprisoned under poor conditions because of their refusal

to serve in the military based on their religious beliefs. As of 2021, 52 Jehovah's Witnesses were being held at the Mai Serwa prison, just outside of the capital, Asmara.

Some of these religious prisoners have spent more than 25 years in jail without standing trial. Due to harsh prison conditions and inhumane treatment of prisoners, two elderly Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have died in prison in 2018.

[Further reading about FORB in Eritrea on HRWF website](#)

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