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Eritrea releases 28 Jehovah's Witnesses from prison

HRWF (04.12.2020) - On December 4, 2020, 26 male and 2 female Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea were set free after being imprisoned for their faith. They have spent between 5 and 26 years in prison.

In October last, 69 Christians had been released, apparently due to the Covid, but five more had been arrested.

In September, HRWF had published its report "**In Prison For Their Faith 2020**".

Reasons for the Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses

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.¹

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.

¹ For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: Eritrea 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/eritrea/>.

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.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Prison in Eritrea

In Eritrea, Jehovah's Witnesses are in prison as conscientious objectors to military service, for holding underground religious meetings or for attempts to share their beliefs with others.

Jehovah's Witnesses behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **55 cases** of Jehovah's Witnesses in its Prisoners' Database,² 46 men and 9 women.

Of the Jehovah's Witnesses currently imprisoned, 16 are known to have been arrested for conscientious objection to military service. Police arrested others who were attending Christian meetings or publicly sharing their faith. More commonly though, they arrested individuals for undisclosed reasons. With one recent exception, those imprisoned have never had the opportunity to offer a defence in court. Most do not know how long they will remain in prison.

The majority of the imprisoned male Jehovah's Witnesses are incarcerated indefinitely, with no hope of release until they die or are near death. Since there are no effective domestic legal procedures or remedies available to them, their imprisonment amounts to a de facto life sentence.

Three men, Paulos Eyasu, Isaac Mogos, and Negede Teklemariam, have been in prison for conscientious objection to compulsory military service since 17 September 1994. Ten other men have been in prison for over ten years. Some Jehovah's Witness prisoners have been detained in metal shipping containers, while others were held in stone or metal buildings half buried in the ground.

In 2018, two Jehovah's Witnesses died after their transfer to the Mai Serwa Prison. Habtemichael Tesfamariam died at the age of 76 on 3 January and Habtemichael Mekonen died at the age of 77 on 6 March. Eritrean authorities imprisoned both men in 2008 without charges.

Articles of the Penal Code

In almost all cases, Jehovah's Witnesses are arrested and imprisoned without any formal criminal charges, trial or sentencing.

² Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>.

Like many others imprisoned in Eritrea, detained Jehovah's Witnesses have no legal recourse and so cannot challenge their indefinite detention.

International advocacy

On 6 July 2017, the **European Parliament's** resolution on *Eritrea, notably the cases of Abune Antonios and Dawit Isaak*, condemned 'in the strongest terms Eritrea's systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations', and called upon the Eritrean Government to 'put an end to detention of the opposition, journalists, religious leaders and innocent civilians'. The Parliament demanded 'that all prisoners of conscience in Eritrea be immediately and unconditionally released' and that 'the Eritrean Government provide detailed information on the fate and whereabouts of all those deprived of physical liberty'.³

Presented to the **UN Human Rights Council** on 16 May 2019, the *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea* stated that Jehovah's Witnesses 'face severe persecution, including denial of citizenship and travel papers, for their political neutrality and conscientious objection to military service'.⁴

The Special Rapporteur urged the Government of Eritrea 'to engage in dialogue with this congregation and release those in prison'. She also urged the Government 'to provide members of this congregation with the opportunity to participate in a form of civil service that is consistent with their religious beliefs'.⁵

The **US Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) recommended that the US government:

- re-designate Eritrea as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for engaging in systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom;
- impose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the US under human rights related financial and visa authorities;
- use bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to urge the government of Eritrea to:
 - a) release unconditionally detainees held on account of their religious activities;
 - b) publish the registration law for religious groups along with clear guidelines for applying for or appealing decisions;
 - c) end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities and grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses.⁶

³ European Parliament, Resolution on the cases of Abune Antonios and Dawit Isaak (2017/2755(RSP)) July 6, 2017. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0309_EN.html.

⁴ General Assembly of the United Nations, *Situation of human rights in Eritrea. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea* (Report A/HRC/41/53) May 16, 2019. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/G1914037.pdf>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Eritrea, 2020, 2020*. <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Egypt.pdf> <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Eritrea.pdf>.

More Christians arrested as others set free

69 freed, but five more arrested – dashing hopes of a change of heart.

Release International (06.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/38cuYzD> - Release International can confirm that a total of 69 Christian prisoners of faith have now been released in Eritrea – while five more have been arrested.

Release partners are not naming the Christians for their own safety. They say they have been released on bail, which could be forfeited if they attempted to leave the country.

Many are long-term prisoners. One has been behind bars for 16 years. None has ever been sent to trial.

Women arrested

When news of their release broke in Eritrea, many Christians took to the streets to celebrate – prompting another round of arrests. The authorities seized five women who stepped outside to pray and rejoice at the news.

‘These were mothers,’ says Release International’s Eritrean partner, Dr Berhane Asmelash. ‘One is a mother of five, another the mother of four. They were cheering from the roadside – and arrested on the spot.’

Given these latest arrests, Dr Berhane fears it could be premature to hope for a change of heart or softening of policy towards Christians in Eritrea. He now considers it unlikely that more prisoner releases could follow.

‘Keep praying’

‘We have been here before,’ he adds, ‘many times. We don’t see any change in government policy. God is the only hope for our country. Keep praying.’

And the Release partner is sceptical that the current releases are linked, as reported, with the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in Eritrea’s overcrowded prisons.

‘The release of so few prisoners wouldn’t change a thing,’ he says. ‘But the virus is only one of their problems. The prisoners face hardship, illness and malnutrition. Most of the prisons don’t have toilet facilities.’

Dr Berhane estimates some 300 Christian prisoners of faith remain in the country – held indefinitely without charge or ever having been sent for trial.

‘Release all the prisoners’

He says: ‘Our message to the government of Eritrea is this, these people haven’t committed any crime. Most of them are hard-working people of peace, who could be used to rebuild their country. Please – release the rest of the prisoners.’

The US State Department puts the figure for all prisoners of conscience in Eritrea as high as 3,000.

According to media reports, half a million Eritreans have fled their country – almost one in six of the population.

'Eritrea has been likened to the North Korea of Africa,' says Release International CEO Paul Robinson. 'It began its crackdown on churches in 2002. Since then, Release has been pressing the government to release its prisoners of faith – every one of them. We will continue to do so.'

Through its international network of missions, Release International is active in some 25 countries around the world, supporting pastors, Christian prisoners and their families; supplying Christian literature and Bibles, and working for justice.

Conditional release of 27 Christian prisoners

CSW has confirmed that 27 Eritrean Christians were released from Mai Serwa Prison near Eritrea's capital, Asmara, on 4 and 8 September, possibly in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic.

CSW (11.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Fxp0M0> - According to CSW's sources, the group consisted of 19 men and eight women who had been detained without charge or trial for between two and 16 years, and who are thought to be the first of around 54 anticipated releases. However, the releases are reportedly conditional on the submission of property deeds ensuring their guarantors are held liable for their future actions.

Sources confirmed that the releases did not include any detained church leaders. Moreover, the releases were preceded by the arrests of several Christians in Asmara, including around four church leaders, two weeks earlier.

Commenting on these events, a CSW source said: "It is a government strategy. They cannot detain everybody, so they keep you for some time, hoping that you will become weak or frightened. Then they put in other people. They release and put other people in prison at the same time."

The source put the number of Christians currently detained at a little over 300, including 39 children, "although these numbers fluctuate."

Tens of thousands of Eritreans are currently held without charge or trial in life threatening conditions in more than 300 sites across the country. Among those incarcerated are prisoners of conscience, some of whom have been detained for well over a decade on account of their political views or religious beliefs. Conditions in these facilities are overcrowded, unsanitary and inadequate; detention facilities include shipping containers, underground cells, and the open air in the desert, and access to medical attention is insufficient and often withheld as punishment. Mai Serwa prison, where the former detainees were jailed, is infamous for utilising metal shipping containers as holding cells.

The spate of recent releases is being attributed to the spread of COVID-19 in the country's overcrowded prison system. However, Eritrea is officially reporting just 341 cases, and claims that no one has died of the virus so far. There has been no independent verification of these assertions.

In an earlier development, reports emerged in August indicating that members of the Muslim community who were detained in 2018 in connection with protests following the death of respected Muslim elder Haji Musa Mohammed Nur had been released.

CSW's Founder President Mervyn Thomas said: "While applauding the fact that people who were deprived of their liberty have regained their freedom, it is also important to

recall that they were detained arbitrarily and without due process for excessive periods simply on account of their religious beliefs. Moreover, these releases remain conditional, as they were secured by property deeds, leaving the guarantors vulnerable to losing their properties. The guarantors could also lose their freedom should a former detainee exercise the right to leave the country, a right articulated in Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Eritrea is party. Far more prisoners of conscience remain arbitrarily detained than have been released, and the fact that these releases were preceded by further arrests is indicative of an ongoing repression of the right to freedom of religion or belief. CSW therefore continues to call for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoners detained arbitrarily, particularly in view of a pandemic that poses a risk to life for those still held in inhumane conditions.”

Eritrean evangelical Christians freed on bail due to COVID-19



If they're not Lutheran, Evangelical Christian women in Eritrea have to pray together in secret. (Photo: World Watch Monitor)

World Watch Monitor (10.09.2020) – <https://bit.ly/35ahti2> - The Eritrean government has released on bail more than 20 prisoners who'd been in detention for years because of their faith, the BBC reports.

It says sources have said that the prisoners are from Christian evangelical and Pentecostal denominations, some held in a prison outside the capital Asmara.

In 2002 Eritrea introduced a new law that forbids all Churches except for the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran ones. Sunni Islam is also officially recognised.

According to a religious freedom campaigner from Asmara, but now based in North America, Hannibal Daniel, people who'd been in prison for about 16 years have been freed on bail.

A regional spokesperson for charity Open Doors International said that, for some time, it had heard discussion that prisoners might be freed on bail due to the coronavirus

pandemic (as has happened in several other countries) but could not independently confirm the reports: "If true, this could be quite significant."

The Eritrean government has not responded to BBC requests for confirmation or denial. Previously, it's dismissed accusations of intolerance to religious freedom.

In May 2019, a monitoring group for the UN said "thousands" of Christians are facing detention as "religious freedom continue[s] to be denied in Eritrea" and questioned why the UN was not monitoring the situation more closely.

In June 2019, Thomson Reuters reported that more than 500,000 refugees worldwide have left Eritrea, up from 486,200 a year earlier.

Many flee compulsory military service, but others flee political or religious persecution.

That same month, the government seized all Catholic-run health clinics in the country, and arrested five Orthodox priests. These moves prompted the UN Special Rapporteur for human rights in Eritrea, Daniela Kravetz, to call on the government to uphold religious freedom for its citizens and "release those who have been imprisoned for their religious beliefs."

In August 2019, Eritrea's Orthodox patriarch, Abune Antonios, was expelled by pro-government bishops of his Church, accused of heresy; he remained in detention throughout 2019.



Abune Antonios, Patriarch, Eritrean Orthodox Church, detained since 2007

Antonios had been under house arrest since 2007, when he refused to comply with the regime's attempts to interfere with church affairs.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom says Eritrea is a 'Country of Particular Concern', saying "In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea worsened, with increasing interference in and restrictions on religious groups. In spite of the significant regional political changes and the 2018 peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Eritrea continues to have one of the worst religious freedom records in the world, and has shown little interest in concretely improving the situation". The State Department estimates there are between 1200 and 3000 prisoners held for their faith. USCIRF included some of those cases in its [new Victims List](#).

Some prisoners, such as the leader of the Full Gospel Church, have been in prison for more than 15 years.

A year, ago, 70 Christians detained included 35 women and 10 children

At least 150 Eritrean Christians were arrested by government officials during summer 2019, with some held in an underground prison made up of tunnels.

For instance on 18 August, 2019, Eritrean security officials detained 80 Christians from Godayef, an area near Asmara airport.

Four days later, on 22 August, the United Nations observed its first annual commemoration of victims of religiously motivated violence. "On this day, we reaffirm our unwavering support for the victims of violence based on religion and belief. And we demonstrate that support by doing all in our power to prevent such attacks and demanding that those responsible are held accountable," [said](#) UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

The government's 2019 clampdown on evangelical Christians had begun in June 2019 when security officials arrested 70 members (among them 35 women and 10 children) of the Faith Mission Church of Christ, in Eritrea's second city, Keren. These were taken to Ashuferu prison, 25kms from the city.

The prison is a vast underground tunnel system and conditions in which detainees are held are very harsh, a local source said. It's far from a main road, the source said, which "means that anyone who wants to visit has to walk a minimum of 30 minutes to reach the entrance.

Inmates are forced to dig additional tunnels when officers need extra space for more prisoners."

After the 2019 arrests, government officials also closed the church-run school, said the local source, whose identity World Watch Monitor withheld for security reasons.

The Faith Mission Church of Christ was the last church still open in the majority-Muslim city, 90kms northwest of Asmara. Started over 60 years ago, the Church once had

schools and orphanages all over the country, according to religious freedom advocacy group CSW.

It had been waiting for registration since it submitted an application in 2002 when the government introduced the new law. This clampdown sent other Christians in Keren into hiding, the source said.

Eritrea is 6th on the Open Doors 2020 World Watch List of the 50 countries in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

27 Christian prisoners released

There are reports from Eritrea that the government has released 27 Christians



Shipping container similar to those used to imprison Eritrean Christians.

Christian prisoners of faith, and hopes are rising that more could follow.

Release International (09.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2GPhPRr> - A trusted contact of Release International says the government has just set free 27 prisoners, most of whom have been behind bars for more than ten years. They have yet to be named. There are believed to be 19 men and eight women, who were jailed at Mai Serwa prison, close to the capital Asmara. They were released on Thursday September 3 and September 8.

There are indications that other Christian prisoners at the jail have been informed they could soon be set free.

This follows the release of 22 Methodist prisoners in July from another prison, mainly women and children.

Prisoners of faith

There are believed to be around 500 Christian prisoners of faith in Eritrea, many imprisoned indefinitely under appalling conditions.

In August, Eritrea announced it was releasing some Pentecostal Christians, among others, in a move to prevent the spread of coronavirus in its overcrowded jails. The 27 just released are believed to be the first to be allowed to leave.

According to the Eritrean media, Adi Abeto prison, designed to hold 800, had 2,500 inmates, and 500 prisoners were forced to share only 20 toilets at Mai Serwa maximum-security prison.

'We are encouraged by the news of this release of Christian prisoners,' says Paul Robinson, the Chief Executive of Release International, a British-based charity which supports persecuted Christians. 'And we hope others will follow.

'Our prayers are that this may signal a change of heart in a regime which outlawed many churches in 2002 and has been persecuting and imprisoning Christians ever since. The time has come to let these people go.



'Institutionalised'

'As for the 27 Christians who have been set free from jail, they are still not free to leave Eritrea. Some have been behind bars for so long that they have become completely institutionalised. They will need help and support.'

A Release contact described his reaction to the news as bittersweet: 'All those wasted years! They have been kept like wild animals in a cage.'

Eritrea, which is ruled by a military dictatorship, has been described as the North Korea of Africa. Some 12 per cent of the population have fled the country, according to UNHCR. Tens of thousands have risked death from drowning to escape to Italy.

Eritrea keeps a tight control over religion. In 2002, Eritrea outlawed every religion except Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholicism and the Lutheran Church.

The authorities shut down many Evangelical and Pentecostal churches and have kept the patriarch of the Orthodox Church under house arrest since January 2007.

Enemies of the state

Registered churches come under tight government control. And Christians who worship in unregistered churches are regarded as enemies of the state.

Estimates of the number of Christian prisoners of faith in the country range from 3,000 down to 300. Release contacts put the figure at close to 500. Many Christian prisoners have been detained for decades.

Some Christian prisoners are kept in shipping containers, where they are exposed to the searing desert heat by day and cold by night. Some are beaten and tortured to try to force them to renounce their faith.

Most Christian prisoners are believed to be Pentecostal or Evangelical. Many have been held for more than a decade. The prison authorities ban praying aloud, singing, preaching or reading religious books.

Eritrea's constitution declares: 'No person may be discriminated against on account of... religion.' But a UN human rights commission noted attacks on Protestants and Pentecostals were 'part of a diligently planned policy of the government'.

'Full religious freedom'

Release International has repeatedly called on Eritrea to free its Christian prisoners and permit full religious freedom. In 2006, Release International and others submitted a petition to this effect signed by more than 110,000 people.

Says Paul Robinson: 'Release is once again calling on Eritrea to set free every Christian prisoner and permit freedom of faith once again in their country.'

Through its international network of missions, Release International is active in some 25 countries around the world, supporting pastors, Christian prisoners and their families; supplying Christian literature and Bibles, and working for justice.

UK's advocacy about Patriarch Antonios of the Eritrean Orthodox Church

HRWF (19.06.2020) - On 3 June Lord Hylton filed a written question (Ref. HL5197) about the situation of Patriarch Antonios of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. On 15 June, Baroness Sugg answered in the name of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office:

We remain concerned about the human rights situation in Eritrea, including the arrests of religious figures such as Patriarch Abune Antonios who has been detained for over 12 years. On 25 July 2019, we issued a tweet specifically calling attention to his apparent excommunication and his ongoing detention. We also raised his case in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's 2018 Annual Human Rights Report. There has been no response from the Government of Eritrea.

The UK Government, along with partners in the international community, have taken every opportunity to voice our concern about arbitrary arrests and detentions in Eritrea, and have called for their release. On 26 February, the UK's International Ambassador for Human Rights, Rita French, delivered a statement during the 43rd Session of the Human Rights Council expressing concern at continuing human rights abuses. Although welcoming Eritrean acceptance of Universal Periodic Review recommendations and offering UK assistance in support of their implementation, she said that the UK would continue to press for the release of arbitrarily detained individuals, and call for respect for freedom of religion or belief, especially for worshippers of unregistered religions.

Our Ambassador in Asmara raised arbitrary detentions of members of the Christian community with the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 20 May 2019 and with the President's senior adviser on 14 August 2019. During visits to Eritrea, the FCO's Head of East Africa Department, in November 2019, and the Home Office International Director, in February, both raised human rights issues with senior members of the Eritrean government. Eritrea remains a priority country for the FCO under our annual human rights reporting, and we will continue to monitor the situation there.

Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church under house arrest since 2007

In 2007, two priests accompanied by government security agents entered the Patriarch's residence and confiscated his personal pontifical insignia. **Abune Antonios**, who was born in 1929 and suffers from health problems, was then arrested for resisting government interference in religious affairs. Since then, he has been under house arrest and strict state surveillance. Formal charges have never been brought against him.[1]

Since 2007, Abune Antonios has been considered by the United States to be a religious prisoner of conscience.[2]

[1] "Abune Antonios," Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, December 12, 2019, accessed May 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abune_Antonios.

[2] "Patriarch Abune Antonios," United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, June 5, 2020. <https://www.uscirf.gov/patriarch-abune-antonios>.

Orthodox Christians in prison

HRWF (19.06.2020) - Despite state recognition, the Eritrean Orthodox Church and its Patriarch have been heavily persecuted since Eritrea became independent from Ethiopia in 1991.⁷ The newly independent government wanted a national Orthodox Church separate from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and so asked Pope Shenouda III of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria for Eritrean Orthodoxy autocephaly.⁸

In 2004, Abune Antonios was elected as Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. He opposed the government's interference in the affairs of the church and objected its confiscation of church properties, hijacking of church offerings, expropriation of tithes and pressuring priests and deacons to military services. The government deposed him, put him under house arrest in 2006 and appointed a new, more obedient, Patriarch.

This context explains the persecution of Abune ANtonios and those who are faithful to him.

Orthodox Christians behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 April 2020, HRWF documented **four cases** of Eritrean Orthodox Christians in its Prisoners' Database.⁹ Three of these individuals are in maximum-security detention centres and one is under house arrest, Patriarch Abune Antonios. Before their arrest, these members occupied high level positions within Eritrea, until they were arrested for involvement in the renewal movement of the Orthodox Church. The number of cases documented by HRWF has not changed over the last couple of years.

Articles of the Penal Code

Quite often believers of all faiths are arrested and imprisoned without any formal charges, trial or conviction.

International advocacy

On 6 July 2017, the **European Parliament** adopted a resolution on the cases of Abune Antonios and Dawit Isaak. The resolution stated that:

Abune Antonios, the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the nation's largest religious community, has been in detention since 2007, having refused to excommunicate 3000 parishioners who opposed the government [...] since then, he has been held in an unknown location where he has been denied medical care.

The European Parliament called 'on the Eritrean Government to release Abune Antonios, allow him to return to his position as Patriarch, and cease its interference in peaceful religious practices in the country'. Additionally, it reiterated 'that freedom of religion is a fundamental right, and strongly condemned any violence or discrimination on grounds of religion'.¹⁰

⁷ "Eritrean War of Independence," New World Encyclopedia, accessed June, 2020. https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Eritrean_War_of_Independence.

⁸ Stefon, Matt, "Shenouda III," Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., March 13, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shenouda-III>.

⁹ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Orthodox Christians, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>.

¹⁰ European Parliament, Resolution on Eritrea, notably the cases of Abune Antonios and Dawit Isaak (2017/2755(RSP)) July 6, 2017. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0309_EN.html.

In its 2018 Annual Report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) expressed its concern for the continuation of religious repression in the country and highlighted the domination of the government in the internal affairs of the four recognised religious communities, including the Orthodox Church of Eritrea. USCIRF determined that Eritrea merited designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. USCIRF has designated Eritrea as a CPC since 2004.¹¹

On 21 June 2019, the **UN Human Rights Council** issued a press release by Special Rapporteur Daniela Kravetz about human rights in Eritrea, especially the government's crackdowns on various religious communities. Concerning the arrest of Orthodox believers, she said that on 13 June 2019 that 'security forces arrested five Orthodox priests from the Debre Bizen monastery. The priests - three over 70 years old - were allegedly arrested for opposing the government's interference in the affairs of the Church'.¹² She also pressed the government to 'release those who have been imprisoned for their religious beliefs'.¹³

As of 15 June 2020, there were 63 FoRB prisoners in Eritrea in HRWF's Prisoners' Database

Jehovah's Witnesses: 55
Coptic Orthodox: 4
Protestants: 4

See details of these documented cases at <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>

¹¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended countries of particular concern: Eritrea 2018*, 2018.

https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_ERITREA.pdf.

¹² "UN Expert Urges Eritrea to Allow Religious Institutions to Operate Freely and Respect the Right of Freedom of Religion," OHCHR, June 21, 2019.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24721&LangID=E>.

¹³ "Crackdown on Christians in Eritrea Spurs UN Expert to Press Government 'to Live up to Its International Commitments' UN News," United Nations, June 21, 2019.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1041041>.