

Table of Contents

- ***USCIRF condemns Religious Freedom violations in Eritrea***
-

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While some of those incarcerated because of their faith were released in 2023, many others remain in jail.

By Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (22.05.2024) - On May 13, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) issued [a statement](#) calling for "greater attention" to religious freedom issues in Eritrea. The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Its Commissioners are appointed by the President and by Congressional leaders of both political parties.

"This month and next," writes the USCIRF, "mark the 20th anniversary of the arrests and imprisonment of three pastors in Eritrea who have been held under atrocious conditions. Meanwhile, hundreds are currently detained due to their religion or belief."

Twenty years ago, within one month the Eritrean authorities arrested first Pastors Haile Nayzgi and Kiflu Gebremeskel, then Pastor Meron Gebreselasie. Bishop Abune Antonios, the third Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the largest religious group in Eritrea, was placed under house arrest, where he died at age 94 in 2022.

In addition, the USCIRF notes, "the Eritrean government does not generally take steps to investigate, prosecute, or punish officials who commit human rights abuses," and "the safety and well-being of religious prisoners of conscience" are not guaranteed. Worse, "prisons in Eritrea are horrifically maintained and those incarcerated endure physical abuse, sexual violence, and torture. As of 2023, Eritrean authorities were holding an estimated 500 Christians as prisoners, including nearly 40 Jehovah's Witnesses."

After a protest by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), "in March 2023, the Eritrean government began the process of releasing some prisoners, freeing nine Christian prisoners, most of whom had been incarcerated for nine years including house church pastor Abenet Yemane." While a step in the right direction, this is certainly not enough, the USCIRF concluded.
