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## **Arrest of a female Jehovah's Witness, six months pregnant, an emblematic case**

HRWF (29.10.2024) - Recently, News Agency Dire has reported on serious violations of human rights in Eritrea, especially affecting Jehovah's Witnesses who have [64 people in prison](#) detained in inhumane conditions: 35 men and 29 women.

The case of Saron Ghebru is emblematic. She was arrested on 27 September 2024 despite being six months pregnant. Born on 21 December 1985 and raised in Asmara, she became a Jehovah's Witness in 2004 and got married in 2019 with someone sharing the same faith. Her father was imprisoned four times because of his religious activities and her brother has been jailed since 2005. Other members of her family were also arrested during a mass arrest of 150 Witnesses on their main annual religious event on 14 April 2014.

Saron was detained three times due to her religious activities: in 2014, 2016 and 2024. On this last occasion, her husband was arrested with her.

### ***Being a Jehovah's Witness is a crime***

The "crime" committed by these citizens is simply that of being Jehovah's Witnesses and, for males, of refusing military service, without the option of carrying out an alternative civilian service. This decision was made by the Eritrean government with a decree issued in 1994, in which Jehovah's Witnesses were required to register for military training to complete their 12th grade of the country's school system. Following this decision, many Jehovah's Witnesses have been arrested and detained as conscientious objectors.

On 25 October 2024, it will be 30 years since the signing of a presidential decree by the Eritrean government that deprived the Witnesses of all civil rights, including citizenship, the possibility to obtain documents showing their identity, to work in government offices, to receive a business license, or to find employment. All of that simply because they wish to peacefully practice their faith, which includes conscientious objection to the unlimited armed military service imposed by the government.

As repeatedly denounced by human rights bodies, a violent and systematic repression of fundamental civil freedoms and personal rights is taking place in the country.

### ***Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom***

Among the most important organizations that have spoken out on this issue is USCIRF, it is worth mentioning the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#),

independent and bipartisan, established in 1998 with the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

In the 2024 Annual Report, it mentioned Eritrea among the countries on the Special Watch List which includes the CPCs (Countries of Particular Concern) nations, in which religious freedom is violated in a “particularly severe” and illegal way.

According to IRFA standards, the violations of these nations are “*systematic, ongoing, [and] egregious. These include torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and punishment, prolonged detention without charges, abduction or clandestine detention, and other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons*” (USCIRF Report 2024 p. 1-2).

In the part dedicated to Eritrea (Report 2024, pp. 28-29) USCIRF states that “throughout the year, the Eritrean government particularly targeted Jehovah’s Witnesses”. As for the situation in prisons, the conditions of those detained are very bad both for lack of care and for the violence suffered and continuous intimidation. “*The government punished families of those who evade military service by evicting them from their homes and denying them food and other basic necessities, especially for women and children*”.

After outlining the situation in Eritrea, USCIRF recommends that the United States

- “reestablish the 2021 arms embargo, reimpose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom,
- reconsider or bar the entry into the United States of those individuals,
- engage with the Eritrean government to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities,
- grant full citizenship right to Jehovah’s Witnesses and
- release the remaining detainees held on account of their religious activities” (2024 Report, p. 28).

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## **Justice long delayed, Jehovah’s Witnesses and a somber 30th anniversary**

***On October 25, 1994, a presidential decree stripped members of the religious organization of Eritrean citizenship and inaugurated decades of persecution.***

by Donald A. Westbrook

[Bitter Winter](#) (04.11.2024) - October 2024 marked a somber anniversary for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and human rights watchers and activists: 30 years of religious persecution, including imprisonment, for [Jehovah’s Witnesses in the eastern African nation of Eritrea](#).

Following Eritrea's war of independence from Ethiopia, Jehovah's Witnesses have been targeted due to their refusal to participate in military service and political activities in alignment with their faith. This persecution culminated with a decree (issued October 25, 1994) from President Isaias Afwerki that stripped Jehovah's Witnesses of Eritrean citizenship and paved the way for more widespread discrimination, persecution, and imprisonment over the past three decades.

As of October 2024, [according to the Witnesses' official website, jw.org](https://www.jw.org), "more than 270 brothers and sisters have been unjustly imprisoned and even tortured for their faith. Currently, 64 are in prison, none of whom have ever been charged with or convicted of a crime."

Sadly, religious freedom violations in Eritrea are not limited to the Jehovah's Witnesses. In its section on Eritrea in their [2024 annual report](#), the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) noted: "The Eritrean government recognizes only Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim as religious identities. Without formal registration, authorities deny faith groups their freedom of religion or belief and prohibit them from building or owning houses of worship or engaging in religious practices such as praying in groups."

The [USCIRF report lists a series of recommendations](#), one of which is to: "Engage with the Eritrean government to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities, grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses, and release the remaining detainees held on account of their religious activities."

I agree wholeheartedly. The Eritrean government must restore citizenship to all Jehovah's Witnesses and immediately release imprisoned Witnesses—as well as members of other new and minority religious groups similarly and unjustly imprisoned. These religious groups must be allowed to register and operate freely according to [Eritrea's own constitutional commitment](#) to freedom of religion, although at present unfulfilled. In addition, Jehovah's Witnesses and other conscientious objectors ought to be provided with alternatives to military service in Eritrea.

Justice for Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea remains long delayed, but President Afwerki can begin to right this wrong by reversing the 1994 decree, restoring citizenship, releasing prisoners, dialoguing with outside groups such as USCIRF, and setting the country on a path to live up to its constitutional aspirations and ensure religious freedom and practices for all Eritreans.

Note: For more on the imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea, including data about particular cases, readers are directed to the [jw.org landing page](https://www.jw.org) for more resources. And for more on the history of Eritrea and religious repression, see, for instance, Tricia Redeker Hepner's "[Religion, Repression, and Human Rights in Eritrea and the Diaspora](#)" ("Journal of Religion in Africa," 2014, 151–188 [44(2)]).

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

***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.