



Home Office

# Country Policy and Information Note

## Eritrea: Religious groups

Version 2.0e

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# 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

The COI within this note has been compiled from a wide range of external information sources (usually) published in English. Consideration has been given to the relevance, reliability, accuracy, objectivity, currency, transparency and traceability of the information and wherever possible attempts have been made to corroborate the information used across independent sources, to ensure accuracy. All sources cited have been referenced in footnotes. It has been researched and presented with reference to the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), dated April 2008, and the [European Asylum Support Office’s research guidelines, Country of Origin Information report methodology](#), dated July 2012.

## 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

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Basis of claim

- 1.1.1 Fear of persecution or serious harm by the state because of the 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 The government only recognises four officially registered religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea.
- 2.2.2 Unregistered (and therefore unrecognised) religious groups include Evangelicals, Baptists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists and the Bahai.
  - i. **Registered religious groups**
- 2.2.3 Members of the registered religious groups can worship openly and freely provided they comply with the government's directives and regulations that relate to religious activities. Individual members who have disobeyed government directives and regulations, or who have openly opposed government interference in the internal affairs of their religious groups have however experienced fines, surveillance, intimidation, arrest and detention. Some of these who have been ill-treated have been well-known religious leaders but some have been ordinary members of their religious communities (see [Treatment of registered religious groups](#)).
- 2.2.4 Decision makers should consider each case on its facts. In general members of the four registered religious 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 that this has come to the adverse attention of the authorities.

## ii. Unregistered religious groups

- 2.2.5 The government has banned religious activities of the unregistered groups and closed their religious places of worship. These groups and their members have experienced human rights violations including torture, extrajudicial killings, restrictions on freedom of movement, deprivation of citizenship (in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses), ill-treatment, arbitrary arrests, detention without charge or due process in severe conditions (see [Treatment of unregistered religious groups](#)).
- 2.2.6 Members of unregistered religious groups who wish to worship openly and freely are likely to have a well-founded fear of persecution in Eritrea.
- 2.2.7 For further 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's fear is of persecution or serious harm at the hands of the state, they will not be able to avail themselves of the protection of the authorities.
- 2.3.2 For further guidance on assessing the availability or not of state protection, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 2.4 Internal relocation

- 2.4.1 As the person's fear is of persecution or serious harm at the hands of the state, they will not be able to relocate to escape that risk.
- 2.4.2 For further guidance on internal relocation, 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 [Appeals Instruction on 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. Policy summary

- 3.1.1 Members of the four registered religious groups are allowed to worship openly and freely and in general are not at risk of persecution.
- 3.1.2 However, individual members of recognised religious groups who have openly opposed government interference in their internal affairs, or who have not complied with government directives and regulations relating to religious activities, have been subject to ill-treatment, surveillance, intimidation, arbitrary arrest and detention. Decision makers should consider each case

on its facts and the individual circumstances of such a person. If it is accepted that they are likely to come to the adverse attention of the authorities, then a grant of asylum would be appropriate.

- 3.1.3 Members of unregistered religious groups who wish to worship openly and freely are likely to face restrictions on freedom of movement, deprivation of citizenship (in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses), harassment, arbitrary arrest, torture, extrajudicial killings, and detention without charge or due process in severe conditions. A member of such a group is likely to have a well-founded fear of persecution in Eritrea.
- 3.1.4 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.

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## 4. Religious groups

### 4.1 Demography

- 4.1.1 The United States State Department (USSD) 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2015' (IRFR), (covering the January 2015 – December 2015 period), published on 10 August 2016, stated:

'There are no reliable statistics 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. The Jewish population numbers fewer than five individuals.'<sup>1</sup>

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### 4.2 Government regulations and restrictions

- 4.2.1 The USSD IRFR for 2015 also 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. The government recognizes four officially registered religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. It appoints the heads of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and the Sunni Islamic community. Places of worship other than those of the four registered religious groups remained closed, but most buildings were unharmed and protected, including the Jewish synagogue. The government continued to refuse approval for most foreign financing of religious organizations...Government lack of transparency and intimidation of sources made it difficult to report accurately on specific religious freedom cases. According to the international NGOs Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, all religious groups were, to varying degrees, targeted by government restrictions. They stated that the government subjected members of unrecognized religious groups to arbitrary detention, torture, forced recanting as a condition of release, and other ill-treatment.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> United States State Department 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2015', 10 August 2016, (Religious Demography), <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2015&dliid=256021#wrapper>, date accessed 15 August 2016

<sup>2</sup> United States State Department 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2015', 10 August 2016, (Executive Summary),

- 4.2.2 The USSD IRFR for 2015 further stated: ‘Groups must renew their registration every year...Since 2002, the government has not approved the registration of additional religious groups...According to the government appointed leaders of the four recognized religious, members of the officially registered religious groups generally did not face impediments to religious practice.’<sup>3</sup>
- 4.2.3 The ‘Detailed findings of the [United Nations] commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea’ (‘the UNCOI’), dated 8 June 2016, stated:  
‘The Commission has previously concluded that the Government of Eritrea perceives freedom of religion as a threat and for that reason has sought to control religious expression. 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, development programmes and charitable assistance...In 2002, the Government issued a decree requiring that all religious groups register or cease their religious activities. Despite attempts to register by some groups, the Government has refused to authorise any other religious group...Following the 2002 ban, the Government stepped up its campaign of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance of members and leaders of unauthorised religious groups that began well before the issuance of the decree. The Commission found that “attacks were not random acts of religious persecution but were part of a diligently planned policy of the Government” which vilified un-authorized religious groups, regularly referring to their leaders and members as foreign state agents.’<sup>4</sup>
- 4.2.4 The UNCOI report also quoted the Eritrean government’s response to the findings of the UNCOI:  
“Eritrea is a secular state. Religious freedom is indeed guaranteed by law. Eritrea has also a rich history of religious tolerance, co-existence and harmony in a turbulent region that is often wracked by acute religious polarization and strife...Even within the confines of secularism, the government of Eritrea has obligations to ensure that centuries-old religious tolerance and harmony is not perturbed by externally-induced new trends of Islamic or Christian fundamentalism that corrode the social fabric. The Government thus introduced administrative regulations in 2002 that basically request new faiths to declare their sources of funding. Most of the miniscule

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<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2015&dliid=256021#wrapper>,

<sup>3</sup> United States State Department ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2015’, 10 August 2016, (Legal Framework),

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2015&dliid=256021#wrapper>,

date accessed 15 August 2016

<sup>4</sup> UN 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](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A_HRC_32_CRP.1_read-only.pdf),  
date accessed 6 September 2016



new faiths did not want to comply with the regulations because they have external funding.”<sup>5</sup>

4.2.5 The UNCOI report also stated:

‘290. Members of authorised religious groups are not exempt from Government interference. While members of officially recognised religious denominations have been allowed to congregate and worship in public, many witnesses believe they are under surveillance. According to one witness who fled Eritrea in 2015:

“In Eritrea, everybody practices in secret except for authorised religions. For these religions, the celebrations are organised in churches and are authorised, but the national security is checking what is said during the mass and other celebrations.”

‘291. For example, in 2014, the Government detained Lutheran priests for six months before their ordination. The Commission has also heard evidence that the Government has been heavily involved in decision-making with respect to the leadership of Muslim and Orthodox religious denominations. While the targeting of members of authorised religious groups may not constitute the crime of persecution, it does further illustrate the degree to which the government fears all forms of independent religious expression.’<sup>6</sup>

4.2.6 The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) ‘2016 Annual Report’ (covering the period 1 February 2015 to 29 February 2016), published on 2 May 2016, 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. Registration requirements include a description of the group’s history in Eritrea; detailed information about its foreign sources of funding, leadership, assets, and activities; and an explanation of how it would benefit the country or is unique compared to other religious communities. Registration also requires conformity with Proclamation No. 73/1995 “to Legally Standardize and Articulate Religious Institutions and Activities,” which permits registered religious institutions the right to preach, teach, and engage in awareness campaigns but prohibits “...infringing upon national safety, security and supreme national interests, instigating refusal to serve national service and stirring up acts of political or religious disturbances calculated to endanger the independence and territorial

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<sup>5</sup> UN Human Rights Council, ‘Detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea’, 8 June 2016 (para 114), [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A\\_HRC\\_32\\_CRP.1\\_read-only.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A_HRC_32_CRP.1_read-only.pdf), date accessed 6 September 2016

<sup>6</sup> UN Human Rights Council, ‘Detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea’, 8 June 2016 (paras 290-291), [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A\\_HRC\\_32\\_CRP.1\\_read-only.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A_HRC_32_CRP.1_read-only.pdf), date accessed 6 September 2016

sovereignty of the country.”...The Baha’i community, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, and the Seventh-day Adventists submitted the required applications after the new registration requirements were enacted; 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.

‘The Eritrean government also strictly oversees the activities of the four recognized religious communities. These groups are required to submit activity reports every six months; instructed not to accept funds from co-religionists abroad (an order with which the Eritrean Orthodox Church reportedly said it would not comply); and have had religious leaders appointed by government officials. 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...Hundreds of Orthodox Christian and Muslim religious leaders and laymen who protested these appointments remain imprisoned. The COI-E as well as Eritrean refugees interviewed by USCIRF reported government surveillance of services of the four official religions. Muslims opposed to the government are labeled as fundamentalists and human rights organizations report that religious freedom violations against the Muslim community increased following the January 21, 2013 mutiny during which 100-200 Army soldiers seized the headquarters of the state broadcaster in Asmara. Furthermore, Eritrean officials visiting the United States reportedly pressured diaspora members to attend only Eritrean government-approved Orthodox churches in this country.’<sup>7</sup>

#### 4.2.7 The USSD IRFR for 2015 stated:

‘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 Department 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...Religious groups may print and distribute documents only with the authorization of the Office of Religious Affairs, which routinely approves such requests only for the four officially registered religious groups. If a religious institution disseminates a publication or broadcast through the media without

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<sup>7</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, ‘2016 Annual Report’, 2 May 2016, Eritrea section, [http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF\\_AR\\_2016\\_Tier1\\_Eritrea.pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_AR_2016_Tier1_Eritrea.pdf), date accessed 11 August 2016

government approval, the author of the publication or director of the broadcast is subject to a fine of up to 10,000 nakfa (\$667) and/or two years' imprisonment.

'Religious groups must obtain government approval to build facilities for worship.

'The law does not address religious education in public school. Religious education is allowed in private schools...Most religious facilities not belonging to the four officially registered religious groups remained closed. The government allowed the practice of Sunni Islam only and banned all other practice of Islam. Religious structures used by unregistered Jewish and Greek Orthodox groups still continued to exist in Asmara. The government protected the historic Jewish synagogue building. Other structures belonging to unregistered groups, such as Seventh-day Adventists and the Church of Christ, remained shuttered. The government allowed the Bahai center to remain open, but not for worship services. The Greek Orthodox church remained open, but there were no services. There were services held in the Anglican church building, but only under the auspices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. There were reports of other Protestant denominations holding services in homes, but not openly.

'Some church leaders stated the government's restriction on foreign financing reduced church income and religious participation by preventing the churches from training clergy or building facilities. The government permitted the Catholic Church to receive financing from the Holy See. The government did not permit the Evangelical Lutheran Church to receive foreign funding.'<sup>8</sup>

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## 5. Treatment of registered religious groups

### 5.1 Eritrean Orthodox Church

5.1.1 A 'Christian Today' article, 'Eritrea: Calls for Orthodox Patriarch's release 10 years after government deposed him,' dated 20 January 2016, stated:

'Orthodox Christians and human rights campaigners have today marked the 10th anniversary of the deposition of the Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios with calls for his release.

'Eritrea is regarded as one of the world's most repressive countries and religion is strictly controlled.

'Government officials told Patriarch Antonios on January 20, 2006 that he was not longer the leader of the country's largest denomination. He was

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<sup>8</sup> United States State Department 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2015', 10 August 2016, (Legal Framework and Government Practices), <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2015&dliid=256021#wrapper>, date accessed 15 August 2016

replaced by Bishop Dioscoros of Mendefera, who has since died and who was never recognised by the Orthodox communion.

'The government's action came after Patriarch Antonios called for the release of political prisoners and refused to excommunicate 3,000 members of his Church who opposed the regime.

'The Patriarch has been under house arrest since May 2007. He is allowed very few visitors and concerns have been expressed about his health.

'Metropolitan Seraphim, the head of the British Orthodox Church, told Christian Today: "We want to see him released." He said that the Orthodox Church was adamant that Antonios remained Patriarch but that talks aimed at securing his freedom had stalled. However, he said that he had been visited recently and found to be in good health.'<sup>9</sup>

- 5.1.2 The June 2016 UNCOI, referring to Patriarch Antonios, noted: 'The Commission was also able to corroborate reports that over ten Orthodox priests were detained in April 2016 for protesting his continued detention and expressing concern about Government plans to appoint a new Patriarch following the death of Abune Dioskoros who was appointed by the Government following the detention of Patriarch Abune Antonio.'<sup>10</sup>

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## 5.2 Roman Catholics

- 5.2.1 The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) '2016 Annual Report', published on 2 May 2016, stated:

'The Eritrean government also strictly oversees the activities of the four recognized religious communities... Within this environment, 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 seminary students and nuns.'<sup>11</sup>

- 5.2.2 A 'Church in Need' article, 'Eritrea severely restricts religious freedom', dated 10 July 2015, cited an anonymous source as stating:

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<sup>9</sup> 'Christian Today', 'Eritrea: Calls for Orthodox Patriarch's release 10 years after government deposed him,' 20 January 2016,

<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/eritrea.calls.for.orthodox.patriarchs.release.10.years.after.government.deposed.him/77196.htm>, date accessed 24 August 2016

<sup>10</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea, 8 June 2016 (para 117),

[http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A\\_HRC\\_32\\_CRP.1\\_read-only.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A_HRC_32_CRP.1_read-only.pdf), date accessed 30 August 2016

<sup>11</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom '2016 Annual Report', 2 May 2016, Eritrea section, [http://www.uscifr.gov/mwg-internal/de5fs23hu73ds/progress?id=nsoUUqAGmXHWCRzsNHqgpmWbuimqH\\_ww2\\_knA8Y2X9g](http://www.uscifr.gov/mwg-internal/de5fs23hu73ds/progress?id=nsoUUqAGmXHWCRzsNHqgpmWbuimqH_ww2_knA8Y2X9g), date accessed 11 August 2016

“It was impossible not to speak out about what is happening in our country, even though the Church has to proceed with caution – otherwise the government might shut down our infrastructure... On paper, we are free to attend our liturgical celebrations, but the government tries to prevent us from doing so,” the source reported. Often, the timing coinciding with Sunday Mass or the celebration of Christian feasts and holy days – such as Good Friday of this year – authorities organize political rallies or sporting events that citizens are obligated to attend. In a similar vein, many school courses are scheduled for Sundays.

‘There are ongoing attempts to force the Catholic clergy and seminarians to undergo military service, which is compulsory for all men aged 50 and under and for all women up to the age of 40. Dozens of seminarians have disappeared and never returned from the period of military call-up. The source affirmed that the Church does “not allow this [practice] to happen anymore, but the authorities don’t allow anyone who has not done military service to leave the country. Hence, priests cannot go abroad to study.”

‘This punitive measure impacts [on] the Church’s ability to prepare seminary professors and severely hampers the formation process – leaving the Church more vulnerable.’<sup>12</sup>

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## 6. Treatment of unregistered religious groups

### 6.1 Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians

#### 6.1.1 The USCIRF ‘2016 Annual Report’ (covering the period 1 February 2015 to 29 February 2016), published on 2 May 2016, 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, engaging in aggressive evangelism alien to Eritrea’s cultural traditions, and causing social divisions. During 2015, 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 State Department reported that some local authorities denied water and gas to Pentecostals. The Eritrean government and Eritrean religious leaders do not publicize arrests and releases and government secrecy and intimidation makes documenting the exact numbers of such cases difficult. USCIRF received confirmation of almost 200 arrests in 2015.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Church in Need’, ‘Eritrea severely restricts religious freedom’, 10 July 2015, [http://www.churchinneed.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8509&news\\_iv\\_ctrl=1481](http://www.churchinneed.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8509&news_iv_ctrl=1481), date accessed 24 August 2016

<sup>13</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ‘2016 Annual Report’, 2 May 2016, Eritrea section, [http://www.uscifr.gov/mwg-internal/de5fs23hu73ds/progress?id=nsoUUqAGmXHWCRzsNHqgpmWbuiqH\\_ww2\\_knA8Y2X9g](http://www.uscifr.gov/mwg-internal/de5fs23hu73ds/progress?id=nsoUUqAGmXHWCRzsNHqgpmWbuiqH_ww2_knA8Y2X9g),

### 6.1.2 The USCIRF '2016 Annual Report' also stated:

'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 a few reported incidents of new arrests. Reports of torture and other abuses of religious prisoners continue. Religious prisoners are sent routinely to the harshest prisons and receive some of the cruelest punishments. Released religious prisoners have reported that they were confined in 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.'

<sup>14</sup>

### 6.1.3 The Jubilee Campaign, in a written statement submitted to the UNCOI in February 2016, stated:

'Not being able to register their religious organization or not wanting to submit to the government's control of their religion has caused many religious groups to meet in secret. However, if found out, those meeting are arrested and detained.

'Thousands of mostly Protestant Christians are thought to be detained indefinitely, some of which are held in metal shipping containers. Although some were initially released after pledging to renounce their faith, none have been formally charged or tried and all are held pending similar denials of faith. Barring a renunciation of faith, prison terms are harsh and lengthy.

'Religious persecution has also been faced by those serving in the military. Individuals have reported being punished for reading their Bible or being caught praying.'

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## 6.2 Jehovah's Witnesses

### 6.2.1 The UNCOI report dated 4 June 2015, stated:

'36. In the implementation of discriminatory treatment on the basis of belief, Jehovah's Witnesses have been arbitrarily deprived of their citizenship. Apart from making it impossible for them to participate in public affairs, the

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date accessed 11 August 2016

<sup>14</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom '2016 Annual Report', 2 May 2016, Eritrea section, [http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF\\_AR\\_2016\\_Tier1\\_Eritrea.pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_AR_2016_Tier1_Eritrea.pdf), date accessed 11 August 2016

<sup>15</sup> Jubilee Campaign, 'Interactive Dialogue with Special Rapporteur on situation of human rights in the State of Eritrea', submitted through the United Nations Human Rights Council, 3 February 2016, [http://www.ecoi.net/file\\_upload/1930\\_1459415114\\_g1603460.pdf](http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1930_1459415114_g1603460.pdf), date accessed 27 September 2016

loss of citizenship entails curtailment of the enjoyment of other fundamental rights, including the right to work when their business licences are arbitrarily revoked, and the right to be recognized as a person before the law when their national identity documents are confiscated.’<sup>16</sup>

6.2.2 The June 2016 UNCOI report noted: ‘With respect to Jehovah’s Witnesses in particular the Government has stated that “Jehovah’s Witnesses had long forfeited their legal status when they refused to recognize the ‘temporal government’ after liberation and the referendum process.”’<sup>17</sup>

6.2.3 The USCIRF ‘2016 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 their 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 reported that some local authorities denied water and gas to Jehovah’s Witnesses.’<sup>18</sup>

6.2.4 The USCIRF ‘2016 Annual Report’ further 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 their 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 reported that some local authorities denied water and gas 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 Mogo, and Negede Teklemariam who have been detained in Sawa prison since September 24, 1994. Moreover, the government’s requirement

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<sup>16</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, ‘Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea’, 4 June 2015, (page 8), A/HRC/29/42 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G15/114/50/PDF/G1511450.pdf?OpenElement>, date accessed 24 August 2016

<sup>17</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, ‘Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea’, 4 June 2015, (page 8), A/HRC/29/42 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G15/114/50/PDF/G1511450.pdf?OpenElement>, date accessed 24 August 2016

<sup>18</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, ‘2016 Annual Report’, 2 May 2016, Eritrea section, [http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF\\_AR\\_2016\\_Tier1\\_Eritrea.pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_AR_2016_Tier1_Eritrea.pdf), date accessed 11 August 2016

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 graduate from high school. 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 are arrested while attending worship services in homes or in rented facilities and individual Witnesses are regularly arrested and imprisoned for expressing their faith to others. Some are quickly released, while others are held indefinitely without charge. In 2015, as many as 55 Jehovah's Witnesses were detained without charge or trial. Of these, 16 are older than 60, five are older than 70, and one is in his 80s.'<sup>19</sup>

6.2.5 The USSD IRFR for 2015, published on 10 August 2016, stated:

'The government singled out Jehovah's Witnesses for particularly harsh treatment because of their blanket refusal to bear arms. Jehovah's Witnesses estimated that 54 members were in detention during the year, including three men who have been imprisoned without charges for over 20 years. Authorities detained a foreign member of the Jehovah's Witnesses in October for proselytizing and held her in detention for a week before releasing her. Other NGO sources corroborated reports of such detentions. Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports of large numbers of Jehovah's Witnesses being detained as a group during the conduct of a religious service...The government generally considered Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious prisoners as being held for religious/national security reasons. Prisoners held for national security reasons were not allowed visitors, and families often did not know where they were being held...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. There continued to be reports that police forced some members of unregistered religious groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals who were being held in detention, to sign statements recanting their religious beliefs...Jehovah's Witnesses reported that members continued to be unable to obtain official identification documents because of their religion...The government continued to withhold documents and entitlements such as passports, national identification cards (required for employment), exit visas, and ration cards.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom '2016 Annual Report', 2 May 2016, Eritrea section, [http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF\\_AR\\_2016\\_Tier1\\_Eritrea.pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_AR_2016_Tier1_Eritrea.pdf), date accessed 11 August 2016

<sup>20</sup> United States State Department 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2015', 10 August 2016, (Government Practices), <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2015&dliid=256021#wrapper>, date accessed 15 August 2016



# Version control and contacts

## Contacts

If you have any questions about this note and your line manager, senior caseworker or technical specialist cannot help you, or you think that this note has factual errors then [email the Country Policy and Information Team](#).

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## Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **2.0i**
- valid from **25 October 2016**

## Changes from last version of this note

Updates to COI.

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