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Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website.

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Eritrea: Treatment of Christians by the authorities, including denominations not recognized by the state (2011-August 2013)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

Sources indicate that Eritreans are almost equally divided between Christians and Muslims (*PHW* 2012; International Crisis Group 21 Sept. 2010, 17). The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report 2012* states that there are "no reliable statistics on religious affiliation" although an international NGO cited in the report states that in 2010, about 63 percent of the population was Christian (US 17 May 2013, 1). The report also adds that, according to the NGO,

...Orthodox Christians make up approximately 57 percent of the population, Roman Catholics 4 percent, and Protestants - including the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Baptists, Presbyterians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and others without international affiliation - 1 percent. It is possible that 2 percent of the population is animist. (*ibid.*)

Sources indicate that the Orthodox Church of Eritrea is Eritrea's largest Christian denomination (US Apr. 2013, 63; OCP 25 Jan. 2012).

The *US International Religious Freedom Report 2012* states that, in August 2011, the US renewed the designation of Eritrea as a "Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA)" (US 17 May 2013, 1). Eritrea was initially designated as a CPC in 2004 because of "particularly severe violations of religious freedom" (*ibid.*). On 21 August 2013, a Team Leader for Africa and the Middle East for Christian Solidarity Worldwide, an advocacy organization that works on religious freedom (CSW n.d.), sent the Research Directorate a speech that he presented at the second session of a seminar entitled "A Human Rights Seminar on North Korea and Eritrea" that took place at the University of London on 31 May 2013. The speech states that "[t]he Eritrean regime has a long-held ideological antipathy towards religion of any sort, appearing to have deemed religious adherence as a competing and dangerous allegiance and a source of national division" (CSW 31 May 2013). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Denominations Not Recognized by the State

The Eritrean government officially recognizes the following four religious groups: the Orthodox Church of Eritrea [Coptic (US Apr. 2013, 64)], Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church (US Apr. 2013, 64; Freedom House 2013; Human Rights Watch 2013, 110). The International Crisis Group states that all other religious groups are "regarded as dangerous, unpatriotic and 'foreign'" (21 Sept. 2010, 11).

Sources indicate that, in 2002, the government enforced a registration system for unrecognized religious groups (US Apr. 2013, 64; AI May 2013, 21). Under the registration system, religious groups must provide detailed information on their finances and membership to the government (*ibid.*; US Apr. 2013, 64). CSW indicates that registration includes "demands for intimate details of the lives of church members," which made "many churches hesitant to comply" (31 May 2013). Sources indicate that some religious groups, such as the Presbyterian Church and the Seventh-day Adventists, attempted to register without success (US Apr. 2013, 64; CSW June 2013, 3). CSW indicates that the Seventh-day Adventist Church applied "years" ago and are still waiting for the government's accreditation (31 May 2013). Sources state that the government has not yet registered any religious groups (US Apr. 2013, 64; AI May 2013, 21; Human Rights Watch 2013, 110). The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) indicates that groups that are not registered do not have a legal basis to practice their religion publicly (US Apr. 2013, 64), and the *International Religious Freedom Report 2012* adds that religious groups who are not registered must "cease activities" (US 17 May 2013, 2). According to CSW's submission to the UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review of Eritrea, sent to the Research Directorate by the CSW Africa and Middle East Team Leader, all churches that were not affiliated with the recognized

denominations were closed on 15 May 2002 (June 2013, 3). The USCIRF also states that places of worship of unrecognized religious groups have been closed (US Apr. 2013, 64).

3. Treatment of Unrecognized Christians by Government Authorities

Sources indicate that religious activities of unrecognized groups are banned (Winnipeg Free Press 24 Aug. 2012; US Apr. 2013, 64). The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2012* says that people belonging to unregistered religions "generally had difficulty obtaining passports and exit visas" (US 17 May 2013, 6). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The USCIRF indicates that the treatment of people belonging to unregistered religions is "particularly dire for Jehovah's Witnesses and members of other small, disfavoured religious groups, such as Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians" (US Apr. 2013, 63).

3.1 Arrests and Detention

Sources report on the arrests of members of unrecognized religions (Human Rights Watch 2013, 111; UK 31 Mar. 2013). Amnesty International (AI) reports that, since 2002, "thousands of adherents of religions not recognized by the state, including Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian denominations, have been arrested for practising their religion" and arrests "continue to be regularly reported ..." (May 2013, 21). Estimates of the number of Christians who were incarcerated in 2013 vary among sources, from 1,200 (OpenDoors 30 May 2013) to between 2,500 and 3,000 (CSW June 2013, 4). AI reports that arrests often occur during religious meetings in private homes, at weddings, and at funerals (May 2013, 21).

The UK *2012 Foreign and Commonwealth Office Report* indicates that there have been "reports of large-scale arrests this year of members of non state-sanctioned Christian denominations" (UK 31 Mar. 2013). The USCIRF also reports on "mass arrests" during their reporting period of 31 January 2012 to 31 January 2013 (US Apr. 2013, 65). OpenDoors USA, an "international non-profit ministry that supports and strengthens persecuted Christians" (n.d.), reports that between January 2013 and May 2013, 191 Christians were arrested (30 May 2013). Sources list several arrests in 2012 and 2013, including the arrests of:

- 17 Christians who were found worshipping when the house was raided in October 2012 (Freedom House 2013; US Apr. 2013, 65). USCIRF states that this occurred in [the village of] Emba-Derho (ibid.);
- 21 Evangelicals worshipping on Good Friday in 2012, who as of 31 January 2013 were still detained (ibid.);
- "several Protestant pastors" (ibid., 65);
- 17 Christians in [the city of] Keren in March 2013 (US 17 May 2013, 4; CSW June 2013, 4);
- 20 Christians from a variety of churches on 17 January 2013, most of whom were arrested in their homes (CSW June 2013, 3);
- 125 Christians in March 2013 (BosNewsLife 5 Mar. 2013; CSW June 2013, 3, 4), which CSW says was conducted through raids of their homes and businesses in [the town of] Barentu (CSW June 2013, 3);
- 37 Christian students from the College of Arts and Social Sciences in Adi Kihe in May 2013 (OpenDoors 30 May 2013);
- 39 Christian high school students in July 2013, who are being held at Sawa military training centre, according to OpenDoors USA (OpenDoors 25 July 2013).

Sources indicate that most Christians in detention are not formally charged (US Apr. 2013, 64; AI May 2013, 21; CSW June 2013, 4). The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2012* states that sometimes people detained for their religious beliefs are "informally" charged with threatening national security (US 17 May 2013, 3). Sources state that people imprisoned on religious grounds are often unable to access legal counsel (US Apr. 2013, 64; AI May 2013, 21).

Several sources indicate that Christian prisoners have been "tortured" (US Apr. 2013, 64; AI May 2013, 23; Human Rights Watch 2013, 111). Sources also indicate that prisoners have been pressured to recant their faith, sometimes in order to be released (US Apr. 2013, 64; AI May 2013, 23). The detention time for Christians ranges from short-term to long-term (US Apr. 2013, 64; AI May 2013, 21). AI states that detention could last weeks, months, or "extended periods," and adds that some people have been arbitrarily arrested for 20 years (ibid.). Sources state that some of the prisoners are being held in metal shipping containers and underground cells (ibid., 23; CSW June 2013, 4).

Sources report on the deaths of Christians in prison (AI May 2013, 22; Freedom House 2013; Human Rights Watch 2013, 111). Freedom House reports on the deaths of three Christians in prison in 2011, including one Jehovah's Witness (2013), and Human Rights Watch reports on the death of one Jehovah's Witness in prison in 2012 (2013, 111). Deaths of Christians in prison reportedly occurred after "torture" (CSW June 2013, 4), because prisoners were not given medical care (ibid.; US Apr. 2013, 64), or because they did not renounce their religion (ibid.).

According to USCIRF, "large numbers are fleeing religious persecution, including religious leaders forced to participate in the national service despite their religious objections. Pentecostal Christians make up a large percentage of these cases, followed by Jehovah's Witnesses" (US Apr. 2013, 67).

3.2 Jehovah's Witnesses

Sources indicate that Jehovah's Witnesses experience "harsh treatment" by government authorities (AI May 2013, 22; US 17 May 2013, 5). The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2012* indicates that this is due to their objection to bear arms (ibid.). AI reports that Jehovah's Witness members that are conscientious objectors to military service have

been arrested and arbitrarily detained (AI May 2013, 22). The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2012* states that the government "reportedly penalized Jehovah's Witnesses and others who did not participate in national military service on religious grounds by denying them government services and entitlements, such as ration cards" (US 17 May 2013, 5). USCIRF states that the "government requires a military training component for secondary school graduation, with no non-military alternative service option, which effectively denies educational and employment opportunities to young Jehovah's Witnesses" (US Apr. 2013, 65). USCIRF also states that some school children of Jehovah's Witness have been expelled because they would not "salute the flag or pay for membership in the officially sanctioned national organization for youth and students" (US Apr. 2013, 65). AI indicates that Jehovah's Witnesses have also been detained for practicing an unrecognized religion (May 2013, 22).

Sources indicate that the citizenship rights of Jehovah's Witnesses have been revoked by the government (US Apr. 2013, 63; CSW June 2013, 3). Sources also report that a 1994 Presidential decree indicates that Jehovah's Witnesses are prohibited from obtaining:

- government jobs (US Apr. 2013, 65; CSW 31 May 2013);
- business permits (ibid.; US Apr. 2013, 65);
- identity cards (ibid.; CSW 31 May 2013), and consequently registration for marriages, land purchases (ibid.; US Apr. 2013, 65) and births (CSW 31 May 2013);
- travel documents (ibid.; US Apr. 2013, 65).

The 31 May 2013 CSW Africa and Middle East Team Leader's speech at the University of London also indicates that, after the decree, Jehovah's Witnesses could not access "accommodation, schools, hospitals or other services generally available for Eritrean citizens" (CSW 31 May 2013). The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2012* says that local authorities "sometimes denied community-based services to Jehovah's Witnesses" (US 17 May 2013, 5).

AI indicates that as of April 2013, 56 Jehovah's Witnesses were in detention (May 2013, 22), and Human Rights Watch similarly says that at the time of publication of their report, 56 Jehovah's Witnesses were in detention (2013, 111). Human Rights Watch reports that 12 Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested in 2012 while attending a funeral (2013, 11).

3.3 Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians

According to USCIRF, the government "frequently targets" Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians (US Apr. 2013, 66). USCIRF adds that

[g]overnment officials have criticized "non-traditional" Christian denominations for engaging in evangelism, which they allege is socially divisive and alien to Eritrea's cultural traditions. The regime also fears co-religionists in the United States could encourage these religious communities to take actions against the government's undemocratic rule. Refugees told USCIRF that government officials often refer to Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians as CIA agents, and that they are frequently discriminated against in employment and housing opportunities. (ibid.)

USCIRF says that the "vast majority" of the people imprisoned for belonging to an unrecognized religion are Evangelical or Pentecostal Christians (ibid., 64). The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2012* says that local authorities "sometimes denied community-based services to ... members of Pentecostal groups" (US 17 May 2013, 5).

4. Treatment of Recognized Christians by Authorities

The USCIRF states that the four recognized religious groups are unable to operate freely and are monitored (US Apr. 2013, 64, 66). The USCIRF also states that, every six months, recognized religious groups must submit "activity reports" to the government (ibid., 66). The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2012* states that religious groups require government approval to build places of worship (US 17 May 2013, 3). AI reports that members of the state-approved religions have also been arrested, including members of the Eritrean Orthodox Church (May 2013, 23).

The USCIRF indicates that the government controls the internal affairs of the four recognized religions, especially the Orthodox Church of Eritrea (US Apr. 2013, 63).

4.1 Eritrean Orthodox Church

USCIRF indicates that, in 2005, the government revoked the previous exemption from mandatory national service from Orthodox priests, monks and deacons, which led to an increase in church opposition to the government's policies (US Apr. 2013, 66). USCIRF states that "[s]ecurity forces began targeting reformist elements in the Orthodox Church, arresting religious activists, and preventing their meetings" (US Apr. 2013, 66). USCIRF adds that the Eritrean Orthodox Church North America Archdiocese reports that over 1,700 Orthodox clergy were "forced out of the church, including 24 imprisoned, 14 banned from entering Eritrean Orthodox Church properties, and seven restricted from leaving Asmara. Hundreds have fled the country" (US Apr. 2013, 66). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the Orthodoxy Cognate PAGE (OCP), a media network that publishes information related to the Orthodox church (n.d.), several Orthodox churches in rural Eritrea have closed, mostly because they do not have enough clergy (25 Jan. 2012). CSW reports that "around 1500 churches are reportedly slated for closure in the near future" (June 2013, 4).

Sources state that the government appointed an administrator of the Orthodox Church (AI May 2013, 23; US Apr. 2013, 66), who, according to the USCIRF, "manages the church's affairs and controls its finances" but is "not a member of

the Orthodox clergy" (ibid.). The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2012* adds that the government has also appointed some "persons in lower-level positions" (US 17 May 2013, 6).

Sources indicate that the former Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios, who was arrested in 2006, continues to be held under house arrest (AI May 2013, 23; Freedom House 2013; US 17 May 2013, 6). The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2012* indicates that the Patriarch was arrested for protesting government interference in church affairs (ibid.), while AI states that he was arrested for protesting against the arrest of three Orthodox priests and for his refusal to cooperate with the government regarding the closure of a church (May 2013, 23). BosNewsLife, an independent Christian news agency, states that priests who sympathize with the Patriarch are reportedly detained (5 Mar. 2013).

5. Christians in the Military Service

The US *International Religious Freedom Report 2012* states that the Eritrean government does not have an alternative to military service for conscientious objectors, which has put religious individuals who do not believe in bearing arms "into conflict with citizenship requirements" (US 17 May 2013, 5).

USCIRF indicates that soldiers are prohibited from engaging in religious activities (US Apr. 2013, 64). Sources state that soldiers are punished for possessing religious literature, such as Bibles (US Apr. 2013, 64; AI May 2013, 21). AI states that conscripts have been detained after being caught reading the Bible or praying (May 2013, 21).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact the following organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Alliance of Eritrean Evangelical Christians in the UK; Human Rights Concern – Eritrea; Suwera Centre for Human Rights.

Internet sites, including: Al Jazeera; Asmarino; Christianity Today; ecoi.net; Eritrea – Ministry of Information; Factiva; United Nations – Refworld.

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