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27 October 2014

ERI104987.E

Eritrea: Treatment of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians by authorities; including members of the Mulu Wongel [Full Gospel] Church; incidents of arrests and detention of Mulu Wongel Church members in Asmara (2002-October 2014)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview of Unregistered Christian Churches in Eritrea

In 2002, the government of Eritrea ordered all religious groups, other than the four officially recognized religions, to register with the state (US 30 Apr. 2014, 55; AI 5 Sept. 2007; Team Leader 16 Oct. 2014). The four officially recognized religions are the Christian Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran Churches and Sunni Islam (ibid.; AI 5 Sept. 2007; US 30 Apr. 2014, 55). According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "no religious group has been registered since 2002," despite registration applications having been submitted by several groups (US 30 Apr. 2014, 55). According to the same source,

[a]s a result of the registration requirement and the government's inaction on applications, all of Eritrea's religious communities, except the four government-sanctioned ones, lack a legal basis on which to practice their faiths publicly, including holding prayer meetings or weddings. (ibid.)

Amnesty International (AI) explains that these "'minority religious groups' had recognized places of worship ... until these were all closed down by the government in 2002" (7 Dec. 2005, 4).

According to a document titled *Catalogue of Religious Persecution Since 2003* by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), a UK-based human rights organization specializing in religious freedom (CSW n.d.), as of May 2014,

religious persecution of Christians from "unregistered" churches still continues unabated in Eritrea. Members of the underground churches disclosed that there are still over a thousand prisoners that have been detained for periods ranging from over ten years to few months. Many more are detained briefly and are released after a period of imprisonment and a stern warning not to engage in religious activities of "unregistered" churches. Those who have been imprisoned for a longer period and then released, lose their employment and it is impossible to find alternative employment in an economy monopolised by the government that imprisoned them for their faith. Upon release many resort to fleeing the country fearing yet another arrest or poverty. The towns of Barentu in the west, Adiquala in the south and Dekemhare near Asmara are said to have the highest populations of Christian prisoners of conscience. (CSW 2014, 19)

Sources report that between 1,200 and 3,000 Christians are currently imprisoned (Team Leader 16 Oct. 2014; WWM 30 May 2013).

For further information about the treatment of members belonging to religious groups that are both recognized and not recognized (unregistered) in Eritrea up to 2013, including unregistered Christian churches, consult Response to Information Request ERI104541.

2. Treatment of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians in Eritrea, 2012-2014

According to the US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report 2013*, citing information provided in 2010 by the Pew Charitable Trust, an international NGO, Protestants, consisting of several denominations including Pentecostals, make up one percent of the Eritrean population (US 28 July 2014, 1). According to AI, "[E]vangelical, [P]entecostal, [C]harismatic or 'born again' Protestant churches" are collectively called "evangelicals (or sometimes 'pentes', a pejorative term)" (AI 7 Dec. 2005, 4). The same source explains that since restrictions were placed on religious groups,

there has been a rapid growth of evangelical churches in Eritrea. This has often been a source of tension between them and the three main Christian churches, which were losing members to them. (ibid., 6)

According to the USCIRF, the government's campaign against unregistered churches "frequently targets Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians" and "Eritrean security forces [have] conduct[ed] mass arrests of followers of these faiths, including at clandestine prayer meetings and religious ceremonies" (US 30 Apr. 2014, 55). Similarly, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Team Leader for Africa and the Middle East at CSW [1] noted that the government's campaign against unregistered churches has "particularly target [ed]" Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians with "varying waves of intensity" since 2002 (Team Leader 16 Oct. 2014).

Sources report that Evangelical and Pentecostal Church members:

- are arrested (AI May 2013, 21; UN 28 May 2013, para. 65; US 30 Apr. 2013, 4; Human Rights Watch Apr. 2009, 59);
- are tortured (ibid., 59-60; WEA 29 Nov. 2010; UN 28 May 2013, para. 65);
- are persecuted (ibid.; Team Leader 16 Oct. 2014);
- are denied administrative services, such as being issued national identity cards (UN 28 May 2013, para. 65); and
- face pressure to recant their faith (ibid.; AI May 2013, 23; US 30 Apr. 2014, 56).

AI reports that detainees arrested for practicing an unregistered religion are detained for varying periods ranging from several weeks or months to years, and that "[l]eaders of churches, such as pastors and preachers, are often among those detained for longer periods" (AI May 2013, 13, 21). Sources note that religious prisoners are often held incommunicado, without being formally charged or granted access to lawyers (ibid.; US 30 Apr. 2014, 56). Sources further report that religious prisoners are held in metal shipping containers or underground cells (AI May 2013, 23; Team Leader 16 Oct. 2014; US 30 Apr. 2014, 56) and are subjected to extreme temperatures (ibid.). It is also reported that religious prisoners are denied medical treatment (AI 5 Sept. 2007; Team Leader 16 Oct. 2014; CSW 2014, 13). Religious prisoners have died as a result of harsh treatment and lack of medical care (ibid.; AI May 2013, 24; Team Leader 16 Oct. 2014).

For further information about the treatment of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians by the authorities up until 2013, consult Response to Information Request ERI104541.

3. Mulu Wongel Church in Eritrea

According to the CSW Team Leader, the English translation of "Mulu Wongel" is "Full Gospel" (Team Leader 16 Oct. 2014). Similarly, according to information provided by a representative of the Eritrean-Canadian Human Rights Group (ECHR) of Manitoba [2], the official name of the church is "'Mulu Wongel Betekiristian'," which is a literal translation of "'Full Gospel Church'" in the Tigrigna language (ECHR 22 Oct. 2014). According to the ECHR representative, the Full Gospel Church is an "Evangelical-Pentecostal Church" that was established "long before Eritrean independence" (ibid.). AI similarly states that the Full Gospel Church is a "long-established evangelical church in Asmara" (AI 5 Sept. 2007), having been "established for several decades" (ibid. 7 Dec. 2005). According to an article published in the *African Studies Review* journal titled "Cosmologies in Collision: Pentecostal Conversion and Christian Cults in Asmara" by Abbebe Kileyesus, a professor of anthropology at Asmara University, the Mulu Wongel Church is one of six different branches of the Pentecostal Church in Asmara (Kileyesus Apr. 2006, 78).

According to the Team Leader at CSW, the "Mulu Wongel Church was the largest Pentecostal Church in Eritrea, numbering at least 3,000 official members and many non-members" (16 Oct. 2014). The ECHR representative said that at the time of closure in 2002, there were two Full Gospel "mega churches" in Asmara, one of which reportedly had more than 3,000 registered members (ECHR 22 Oct. 2014). Further information

about current membership numbers of the Church could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.1 Treatment of Mulu Wongel Church Members by Authorities

In May 2002, along with other "independent Protestant churches," the Full Gospel Church was ordered by the government to close down (UK Mar. 2009, para. 3.6.3; VOM 5 Nov. 2003). Sources report that in October 2003, government authorities confiscated and sealed the complex of the Full Gospel Church in Asmara (ibid.; CSW 2014, 2), ordering church members and staff to leave the building permanently (ibid.). Since that time, Mulu Wongel Church members have not been able to practice their faith in the open (Team Leader 16 Oct. 2014; ECHRG 22 Oct. 2014). According to sources, members practice their faith in hiding (AI 7 Dec. 2005, 9; ECHRG 22 Oct. 2014), including in private homes (ibid.).

3.2 Arrests and Detention of Full Gospel Church Members in Asmara

3.2.1 Arrests of Full Gospel Pastors and Leaders in Asmara, 2004-2011

According to the Team Leader at CSW, the Mulu Wongel Church is "currently unregistered and heavily persecuted" and as "the largest Pentecostal Church, it has been particularly targeted, with prominent leaders amongst the first to be imprisoned indefinitely" (Team Leader 16 Oct. 2014). AI reports that

[a]t various points in 2004, 2005 and 2007, the arrests took place of a large number of pastors from various Christian churches including the Full Gospel Church ... The majority of these pastors remain in arbitrary detention. None has been charged with a crime or brought before a court. (May 2013, 21)

Sources report that in May 2004, two senior Full Gospel Church leaders were arrested in Asmara: Rev. Haile Naizge [Naizgi], chairman of the Full Gospel Church at that time, and Dr. Kufllu [Kiflu] Gebremeskel, chairman of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance (CSW 2014, 3; Release International Apr. 2006; AI 7 Dec. 2005, 11), who is also the former chair of the Mulu Wongel Church (ibid.). The Team Leader also noted that both Rev. Naizge and Dr. Gebremeskel were initially held in police cells in Asmara, remain detained to date, and are now believed to be held incommunicado in the Wengel [Wongel] Mermera investigation centre in Asmara (Team Leader 16 Oct. 2014). According to AI, as of May 2013, Dr. Gebremeskel had never been charged with a crime or brought before a court and had been held in "indefinite incommunicado arbitrary detention" since his arrest in 2004 (May 2013, 22).

The Team Leader stated that as of 2005, 7 of the 16 imprisoned senior church leaders were from the Mulu Wongel Church (16 Oct. 2014). CSW reports that in 2005, Full Gospel Church Pastors Hagos Tuomai, Kidane Gebremeskel, Abraham Belay and Fanuel Mehreteab [Mihreteab] were arrested (CSW 2014, 5). Pastor Tuomai was taken to the Sawa military camp for "'military punishment'," while the three other pastors were held in [Asmara's] Karchele security prison (ibid.). According to CSW, Pastor Belay was transferred to the Wi'a military camp [located close to the Red Sea port of Massawa] to undertake military service (ibid.). World Watch Monitor (WWM), a news outlet run by Open Doors [4], which aims to raise awareness on the persecution of Christians (*Christianity Today* 8 Jan. 2013), reports that Pastor Fanuel Mehreteab was released from Asmara's Sempel prison two years after his arrest in January 2005 and was "forced to surrender property deeds to guarantee his required bail" (WWM 15 Feb. 2007). The same source reports that Mehreteab was first held at the Wengel Mermera investigation centre and was taken, together with two other pastors, before military commanders in extrajudicial hearings that took place in September 2005 (ibid.; BosNewsLife 15 Feb. 2007).

Sources report that Full Gospel Senior Pastor Kidane Weldou [Woldu] was also arrested in 2005 in Asmara (CSW 2014, 6; AI 24 Mar. 2005; Compass Direct 22 Mar. 2005). According to the CSW Team Leader, Rev. Weldou remains in detention and is reportedly imprisoned in Asmara's Wengel Mermera investigation centre (16 Oct. 2014).

CSW reported that according to the news service Compass Direct News [3], in 2006, "at least 40 pastors, elders and leading laymen" from banned Protestant churches, including the Full Gospel Church, were arrested in Asmara (CSW 2014, 8). Also in 2006, sources reported that Full Gospel Pastor Jorjo Gebreab was arrested (WWM 4 Jan. 2006; BosNewsLife 8 Jan. 2006).

In 2007, WWM reported that authorities had not disclosed any charges against the pastors and priests who were held at the Wengel Mermera investigation centre, and that "[m]ost are held incommunicado, with police authorities refusing to even confirm their location" (WWM 15 Feb. 2007). In 2007, WWM reported that Full Gospel Pastor Habtom Tesfamichel was arrested in Asmara and was imprisoned in the Wengel Mermera investigation centre (ibid.).

CSW states that in 2009, according to Open Doors, Pastor Tewelde Hailom, founding elder of the Full Gospel Church in Asmara, was placed under house arrest, and 10 others, including his assistant and members of his congregation, were also detained (2014, 15).

3.2.2 Arrests of Other Full Gospel Church Members in Asmara, 2004-2011

Sources report the following additional arrests and detentions of Full Gospel Church members from 2004 to 2011:

- In February 2004, in the first incident whereby criminal charges and fines were imposed on members of banned denominations, 10 Full Gospel Church members were arrested at a house in Asmara; all were reportedly imprisoned, except the house owner who was given a fine for holding an "illegal meeting" in her home (CSW 2014, 2).
- Also in 2004, two female members of the Full Gospel Church in Asmara were arrested in Asmara and taken to the Mai Serwa military camp [located near Asmara] (ibid., 4).
- In 2005, 45 members of the Full Gospel Church in Asmara were arrested during a prayer held at a private home; 16 were conscripted into the military, while the others were released after a few weeks (ibid., 5).
- In 2007, 10 male and female Full Gospel Church members were arrested while worshipping privately in a home in Asmara; they were reportedly detained incommunicado without charge or trial in Karchele prison (AI 5 Sept. 2007).
- In 2008, a Full Gospel Church member, who had been arrested "on account of his faith" while participating in a prayer meeting, died from malaria in Eritrea's Wi'a military camp; he was reportedly denied medical attention by prison guards (CSW 2014, 13) [5].

3.2.3 Incidences of Arrests of Full Gospel Church Members in Asmara, 2012-2014

Information about recent arrests and detention of members of the Mulu Wongel Church in Asmara was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. According to the Team Leader at CSW, in regard to the Mulu Wongel Church, "[p]ersecution and arrests continue to date. The government seeks to infiltrate underground church networks and make arrests, and when the arrests are made, numbers are significant" (Team Leader 16 Oct. 2014). Voice of the Martyrs (VOM), an inter-denominational Christian NGO that provides assistance to persecuted Christians worldwide (VOM n.d.), reports that, according to Release International [6], more than 20 Christians were arrested in Asmara in January 2013, including leaders of the Full Gospel Church (VOM 31 Jan. 2013).

According to the ECHR representative, "[t]housands are languishing in underground prisons merely because they were/are Mulu Wongel Church followers" and "[a]s recently as this year [in] February, March and April 2014, there were reports of crackdown[s] on the hidden gatherings [of church members] and hundreds of men, women, elderly and children were taken to prison" where many of them remain (ECHR 22 Oct. 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

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.

Notes

[1] The Team Leader for Africa and the Middle East at CSW has been working on Eritrea since 2002. He has given talks about religious freedom in Eritrea before the European Parliament, the UN Human Rights Council, and the US Congress.

[2] The ECHR, also known as "Hidmona," was founded in 2009 by Eritrean Canadians to raise awareness on the human rights violations "perpetrated by the Eritrean government on the citizens" (ECHR n.d.).

[3] Compass Direct News was a news service reporting on the situation of Christians persecuted for their faith (Eurasia Review n.d.). It was run by Open Doors but stopped operating in 2011 (*Christianity Today* 8 Jan. 2013).

[4] Open Doors is an advocacy and support international organization for persecuted Christians worldwide (Open Doors n.d.).

[5] Information on whether this individual was originally arrested in Asmara before being transferred to the military camp could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

[6] Release International "serves the persecuted church around the world" by "supporting persecuted pastors and their families," "providing leadership and theological training," supplying bibles and Christian literature, and campaigning "on behalf of persecuted Christians" (Release International n.d.).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact the following individuals and organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: former Asmara University professor; Amnesty International; Eritrean Evangelical Church, Washington, DC; Full Gospel Eritrean Church, Stockholm; Human Rights Watch; International Christian Concern; Mulu Wongel Believers Fellowship Network; Open Doors Canada; professor, Centre for Law and Religion, Cardiff University, UK; professor of human rights law, University of Pretoria; World Evangelical Alliance.

The following individuals and organizations could not provide information for this Response: Association of Evangelicals in Africa; professor of international law and human rights, Emory University, Georgia; Voice of the Martyrs Canada.

Internet sites, including: African Human Rights Law Journal; Agence France-Presse; Alenalki; Al Jazeera; AllAfrica.com; Asmarino Independent; Asylum Information Database; BBC; Christian Science Monitor; ecoi.net; Erigazette.org; Eritrea Daily; Factiva; Freedom House; Human Rights Concern – Eritrea; Human Rights Without Frontiers; International Crisis Group; International Federation for Human Rights; Ireland Refugee Documentation Centre; Minority Rights Group International; Missionary Service News Agency; Mission Network News; *Le Monde diplomatique*; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; Release-Eritrea.com; UK – Home Office; UN – IRIN, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld, Reliefweb; US – Central Intelligence Agency's *World Factbook*, US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants; Worthy News.

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Date modified: 2015-08-13

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