

Introduction

Although Article 19 of Eritrea's constitution, ratified in 1997, states that 'no person may be discriminated against on account of...religion', the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) has not implemented this document, and claims to be drafting a new one.

In May 2002 Eritrea effectively outlawed religious practices not affiliated with the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran or Orthodox Christian denominations, or Sunni Islam. Other religious groups must register in order to practise their faith; however, the registration process is onerous, intrusive, restrictive and inconclusive. Moreover, even the four government sanctioned religious groups experience harassment and repression.

While a 2018 rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea was accompanied by human rights improvements in Ethiopia, similar developments are yet to occur in Eritrea. During an interactive dialogue with the United Nations Human Rights Council in March 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea stated there had been "no concrete evidence of progress" in any of the five benchmarks articulated in an earlier report, namely, rule of law, national service reforms, the promotion of civil liberties, women's rights and gender equality, and an improvement in the operating environment for international agencies. She also regretted Eritrea's ongoing non-cooperation with her mandate.

Thousands of Eritreans continue to flee their country each month to escape the pervasive repression. According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 12% of the population had become refugees or asylum seekers as of June 2016.

Detentions

Since 2002 thousands of adherents of non-recognised creeds have been detained without charge or trial in inhumane, life threatening conditions, where they may experience torture or even death. There are currently 52 members of the Jehovah's Witness movement in detention. The number of Christian prisoners is more difficult to ascertain, but CSW confirmed in 2018 that 345 church leaders and officials were being held in over 300 prisons, while estimates of imprisoned lay persons range from 800 to 2,000.

Notable is the case of Abune (Father) Antonios, the legitimate patriarch of the Orthodox Church. He has effectively been under house arrest since January 2007

after having been removed from office in 2006, in violation of canon law, for repeatedly objecting to government interference in ecclesiastical affairs and refusing to excommunicate members of the Orthodox renewal movement known as Medhanie Alem. With the exception of a tightly managed appearance in July 2017, he has not been seen in public since his arrest, except in smuggled videos in which he criticises the conditions and grounds of his detention.

According to local sources Patriarch Antonios, who is severely diabetic and suffers from high blood pressure, is currently being kept in isolation and is not allowed visits, even from family members. In July 2019 five progovernment bishops signed a statement accusing of the patriarch of having committed heresy and stripping him of all official authority. The letter effectively excommunicated the patriarch.

Military service

Members of the Jehovah's Witness movement have suffered severe mistreatment on account of doctrinal exigencies that meant they did not vote during the 1993 independence referendum, and requested to participate only in non-military aspects of national service. The community was stripped of citizenship rights; those who had declined active military service remain detained indefinitely, and any caught meeting clandestinely face detention and harassment, including children and the elderly.

Military service is meant by law to last for 18 months, but remains indefinite in reality. Recruits receive minimal wages and are subject to forced labour. Young female recruits can face sexual harassment and violations by senior officers. Random military round-ups continue to occur. On 4 February 2020, Shewit Yakob Gebretensae, 27, was shot dead in Mendefera by police who had attempted to seize him as he walking home.¹

In a report released in June 2016, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COIE) "found reasonable grounds to believe" that crimes against humanity, "namely enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, other inhumane acts, persecution, rape and murder" have been committed in a "widespread and systematic manner" since 1991. These crimes were deemed to have been committed largely but not exclusively within the context of the military service regime.

¹ Human Rights Concern Eritrea, 'A 27 year old Eritrean is shot dead in the street by armed police', 10 February 2020 <https://hrc-eritrea.org/a-27-year-old-eritrean-conscript-is-shotdead-in-the-street-by-armed-police/>

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Recent developments

During May 2019 171 Christians, including at least 14 minors, were arrested in Asmara and Godaif.

In June a Muslim named Said Mohamed died following severe mistreatment in detention and delayed access to medical attention.

On 12 June 22 health facilities owned by the Catholic Church were seized and closed in line with a government directive that was communicated verbally and enforced by police, soldiers and government doctors. In-patients were ejected, nuns who lived in the premises were evicted, and equipment and furniture was carted away to unknown locations. The closures followed the release on 29 April of a pastoral letter by Eritrea's Catholic bishops calling, among other things, for "resolute and historical change" through the setting up of a comprehensive truth and reconciliation plan.

On 13 June five Orthodox priests from the Debre-Bizen Monastery in the country's Northern Red Sea Region were arrested. Abba (Father) Kebreab Tekie, Abba Markos Ghebrekidan, Abba Ghebretensae Teweldemedhin, Abba Kidanemariam Tekeste and Abba Ghebretensai Zemichael were detained, reportedly for supporting Patriarch Antonios and protesting government interference in Church affairs.

On 23 June Eritrean security agents raided a gathering of members of the Faith Missions Church in Keren, Eritrea's second largest city. A number of people, including pregnant women, mothers, children and at least one entire family, were arrested, and property found at the venue was confiscated. Faith Missions Church has been in Eritrea since the early 1950s, and used to run orphanages and schools across the nation.

In August Eritrean security officials detained over 80 Christians, most of them from Godaif in Asmara.

In September, three Catholic-run secondary schools were closed and confiscated, along with five others run by Protestant and Muslim congregations.

On 28 November at least 21 Eritrean Muslims were rounded up and arrested in the towns of Mendefera, Adi-Quala and neighbouring villages, including businessmen, and religious and community leaders. In January 2020 Human Rights Concern-Eritrea published a list of names of those

detained, reporting they had still not been released and that their whereabouts remained unknown.²

CSW received news of the deaths of two imprisoned Christian men during 2019. One died in Dhalak prison, while the other died in Mai Serwa. They are survived by their wives, and four and three children respectively.

In February 2020 a high ranking delegation of Catholic dignitaries led by Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel, C.M., Archbishop of Addis Ababa and head of the Ethiopian Catholic Church, was not allowed to enter Asmara. Despite possessing valid entry visas the delegation was detained for sixteen hours before being sent back to the Ethiopian capital.

Recommendations

To the government of Eritrea:

- Implement the ratified constitution and facilitate all rights enshrined within it.
- Release all prisoners of conscience, including those detained on account of their religion or belief, immediately and without precondition.
- Immediately and unconditionally release and reinstate the legitimate patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios.
- End the indefinite extension of the legally stipulated 18-month term of military service, ensure the demobilisation of those who have served excessive tours of duty, and terminate the use of military conscripts and detainees as forced labour.
- End arbitrary arrest, incommunicado detention, and indefinite detention without charge or trial.

To the international community:

- Establish judicial mechanisms to hold identified perpetrators of severe human rights violations and crimes against humanity in Eritrea to account.

² Human Rights Concern Eritrea, 'Eritrean Government Arrests Dozens of Eritrean Muslims', 13 January 2020 [https://hrc-](https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrean-government-arrests-dozens-of-eritrean-muslims/)

[eritrea.org/eritrean-government-arrests-dozens-of-eritrean-muslims/](https://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrean-government-arrests-dozens-of-eritrean-muslims/)