

Religious Freedom in Eritrea

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Eritrea is one of the world's worst violators of religious freedom. Current repression is an outworking of a policy dating back to when the government was a Marxist liberation movement, with a built in antipathy towards religious sentiment of any kind. Policy documents issued during the armed struggle provided an early indication of its subsequent actions against all faiths.

The first group to be attacked openly during the post-independence era were the Jehovah Witnesses, who effectively lost their rights as citizens after refusing to participate in the national referendum on independence and in active military service. Many were detained and mistreated, and some Witnesses imprisoned at that time are still in jail today.

Next the government moved to control the religious activities of the Muslim community. A government approved Imam was installed. Hundreds of religious teachers and other Muslims deemed to be in opposition to this installation were detained, an unknown number of whom are reported to have been executed extra-judicially.

The repression of both of these religious communities continues to date. However, while Muslims and Jehovah Witnesses experience periodic harassment and incarceration, the main focus of the government's recent repression of religious activity has been protestant or evangelical churches.

I have just completed a visit to several African countries. Information from recent arrivals not only contradicts the Eritrean government's submission regarding its respect for human dignity, religious freedom and the rights of prisoners, but is also consistent with a growing body of evidence gathered since 2002 and earlier. Their testimonies show that

1) The targeting of evangelical/pentecostal/charismatic Christians continues, with arrests occurring in waves. Approximately three weeks ago, the government launched its latest massive hunt for Christians from prohibited churches in a variety of localities, imprisoning over 90 people. Arrests now appear to be occurring cyclically – two months of inaction followed by a new wave. As one source woefully observed, “no-one knows when it will stop”.

The targeting of Christians is reported to be at its worst in the town of Mendefera, where the head of security is described as “illiterate and zealous”. One source informed me that “persecution of Christians actually started in Mendefera, adding that the town is now effectively “cleansed” of Christians, since they have either been detained or have fled.

2) In a gloomy economic climate, the construction of prisons was wryly described by several refugees as Eritrea's main growth industry. Prisons range from underground facilities to overcrowded halls made of iron sheeting in hot locations, to what were described as “villas without names”, to one of the newer facilities, Mitire, where most Christians captured during the waves of arrests that have occurred since November 2008 have been taken.

Conditions in Mitire:

- It is located in the desert, where there are poisonous snakes
- There is no shade – it is an open-air facility
- Prisoners receive very little food; staple diet is lentil soup, although prisoners can at times bake bread from sorghum
- There are no medical services

- Prisoners are made to work hard, constructing buildings for officers
- Most leave the facility after falling gravely sick.

In all of the prisons, beatings continue to be administered routinely, systematically and frequently, or even casually on all prisoners, regardless of their faith. The beatings range from a single blow to any part of the body administered merely to attract the attention of a prisoner, to beatings with fists, stampings with feet, and blows with an iron rod known as a shafshafa or any other convenient implement. The beatings are administered without regard to the vital organs or, indeed, the life of a prisoner. For example, one man who had been caught attempting to cross the border watched in horror as his would-be guide received a blow to the head with the large metal buckle of a thick belt that opened a huge gash as security force members were seeking very routine information. In another case, a female prisoner in Wi'a detention centre was reportedly paralysed following severe beating and torture.

3) Christians continue to be pressurised to renounce their faith as a precondition for release. A church leader and former prisoner provided an eyewitness account of the deaths of two Christian men, Mogos Solomon and Tedros Gebre, in Wi'a detention centre. Both had developed severe complications and were informed that they would receive medical attention once they renounced their faith. Both refused, and both died.

4) The mistreatment of prisoners through forced labour also continues. One former prisoner described how prisoners of all faiths and none were forced to work on two farms owned by General Wuchu, a member of the president's inner circle. One of these farms was in a malarial area, and prisoners slept in the open air surrounded by thorns. Around 200 prisoners contracted cerebral malaria, one of whom died. It was only then that the others, who were initially being treated only with Panadol, received appropriate treatment.

5) The continuing mass exodus of Eritreans is an indication of the severe human rights crisis underway in that country. Some attempt to flee repeatedly, despite having been caught and severely punished. Unfortunately, their problems do not end once they manage to leave. The situation for refugees in African countries remains problematic, especially in countries where there is an Eritrean diplomatic presence. In such instances, refugees and asylum seekers face harassment and even violence or forcible return.

- In Kenya, security has temporarily improved since the expulsion earlier this year (2009) of Eritrean diplomats
- Sudan, though the first port of call for most refugees due to geographic proximity, is a dangerous place for them. In an indication of the reach of the regime, President Afewerki is reported to have recently boasted that refugees in Kassala, eastern Sudan, may as well still be in Asmara. Last week in Khartoum, a large number of the Eritrean community disappeared. It is suspected that they were abducted and forcibly returned to Eritrea following a visit to Sudan by President Afewerki. Juba, capital of southern Sudan, is a little safer, but can still be dangerous due to corruption
- In Uganda, the newly opened Eritrean Consulate has made life increasingly insecure for refugees.

Yet the exodus continues. In an indication of the extent of this, I was informed that on average over 40 people a day were now arriving at Mai Ayni, a newly-opened camp for Eritrean refugees in northern Ethiopia. Ninety people a day are said to be fleeing to Sudan, despite the dangers, and an unknown number have been shot dead or imprisoned in the process of escaping.

In today's session it was clear that states throughout the world are now aware of the human tragedy that is Eritrea. It is to be hoped that these states will transform their words into action and ensure an end to this suffering. I also join in the appeal for international assistance for the many refugees in destitute situations.

Thank you.

Dr Khataza Gondwe
Research and Advocacy
Christian Solidarity Worldwide

