

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea remained extremely poor. The government continued to systematically detain individuals for their religious beliefs, including minors. The government did not register any new religious organizations, and individuals practicing faiths other than the four officially recognized by the government faced intimidation and prosecution by Eritrean authorities. The Eritrean government recognizes only Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim as religious identities. Without formal registration, authorities deny faith groups their freedom of religion or belief and prohibit them from building or owning houses of worship or engaging in religious practices such as praying in groups. Members of officially recognized religions also faced restrictions and government backlash for practicing their faith.

Conditions for religious prisoners of conscience in Eritrea are particularly poor. First-hand accounts describe physical abuse, sexual violence, and torture as systematic and ongoing practices. Officials reportedly often denied prisoners medical treatment, and many have died due to severe human rights abuses. Additionally, prison authorities pressured arrested individuals to renounce their faith and banned praying aloud, singing, preaching, and possessing religious books.

Throughout the year, the Eritrean government particularly targeted Jehovah’s Witnesses. As of December, 36 members of the community remained in prison. The prisoners face unsanitary and

decrepit facilities where they experience violence and intimidation. The government punished families of those who evade military service by evicting them from their homes and denying them food and other basic necessities, especially for women and children.

In March 2023, the Eritrean government released nine Christian prisoners, most of whom served sentences of more than nine years. These included four from Mai Serwa prison and five in the town of Assab, including house church pastor [Abenet Yemane](#). In August, the government released 13 unidentified prisoners that had each completed a 10-year sentence. In April, founder and leader of Meserete Kristos Church Pastor Tesfay Sevoum died in Mai Serwa prison five days after authorities took him to Dembe Sembe hospital in Asmara for treatment. His body remained unburied for 10 days, in violation of his religious requirements. The government also arrested 44 Orthodox monks in April, all vocal supporters of [Abune Antonios](#), the Eritrean Church patriarch who died in 2022. Authorities later released them. In February, an Orthodox monk and supporter of Abune, Yeneta Israel, died violently in his monastery in what authorities declared a suicide. The state did not pursue further investigation. The Eritrean government continues to hold more than 500 Christians in prison due to their religious identity, including 103 students arrested in the capital Asmara during a singing and recording session for social media.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Eritrea as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Reestablish the 2021 arms embargo referenced in [22 CFR 126.1\(a\)](#) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations as the CPC designation’s corresponding presidential action;
- Reimpose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Engage with the Eritrean government to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities, grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah’s Witnesses, and release the remaining detainees held on account of their religious activities; and
- Encourage the Eritrean government to extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by USCIRF, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Highlight religious freedom issues in Eritrea through advocacy for religious prisoners of conscience, legislation, hearings, briefings, delegations, and other activities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Religious Freedom Concerns in the Horn of Africa](#)
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Eritrea](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Eritrea](#)

Background

Eritrea has a [population](#) of 6.3 million people. Approximately 50 percent of the population are Sunni Muslim, 30 percent are Eritrean Orthodox, and 13 percent are Catholic. Faiths comprising less than five percent of the population include Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is. Approximately two percent of the population follow traditional indigenous religions. The government continues to allow the only known Jew in the country to maintain a historic synagogue in Asmara.

The Eritrean constitution nominally protects citizens' rights to freedom of religion or belief. The law and constitution prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the freedom to practice any religion and to change one's religion. However, the government regularly violates these rights in practice. Proclamation No. 73 of 1995 permits the government to exert full control over religious activities in the country.

Eritrea's geostrategic position by the Red Sea makes it an enticing partner for several influential countries, including [Ethiopia](#), Russia, and [China](#), with Moscow [prioritizing](#) sea trade routes and a base of operations. In 2020, Eritrean military units joined Ethiopian troops to combat the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. The conflict in Tigray partly reflected groups with often overlapping ethnic and religious identities attacking one another, making the cause of the hostilities more difficult to pinpoint. A November 2022 truce ended the violence.

In March 2023, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) urged the Eritrean government to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief and to guarantee related freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association. UNHRC members called upon the government to release all those detained based solely on their religion or belief. The Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights [stated](#) that the human rights situation in Eritrea is dire and shows no signs of improvement, with credible reports of torture, arbitrary detention, inhumane detention conditions, and enforced disappearances. The government uses many such abuses to target religious minorities in particular.

In October, several religious organizations [submitted](#) a joint report on Eritrea to the UNHRC ahead of the Eritrea's 2024 Universal Periodic Review. The report urged the Eritrean government to ratify UN Conventions related to freedom of religion or belief, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, and the Covenant against Torture and Other Cruel Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The report also encourages permitting religious communities to register in accordance with international law, immediately releasing prisoners currently detained for their religious beliefs and practices and putting an end to detention based on religion, and inviting UN working groups to the country to assist in complying with international law.

Forced Conscription

Eritreans between the ages of 18 and 50 must serve in the military for 18 months. Authorities grant exemptions only to pregnant women and people with a physical disability. The government [imprisons](#) those who refuse to serve, including those whose refusal is based

on religious belief. The Eritrean government [uses](#) military draft mobilization drives called *giffas*, especially in or near larger cities. In 2023, Eritrean authorities continued to round up and forcibly conscript individuals, including older men. Young people forced into the military are often made to serve far longer than their 18 months of mandatory service. Authorities have increasingly targeted the families of those who sought to evade military service, enforcing severe penalties on family members.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

In 2023, conditions for religious minorities were particularly egregious. At least 500 Christians faced extremely long prison sentences and harsh prison conditions. These prisoners include evangelicals [Haile Naizghe](#) and [Kiflu Gebremeskel](#), both imprisoned since 2004 because of their association with a network of banned churches.

As of the end of the reporting period, the Eritrean government was holding 36 [Jehovah's Witnesses](#) in prison. It justifies these detentions on Jehovah's Witnesses' refusal to serve in the military, imposing egregiously long sentences on community members who conscientiously object on religious grounds. Jehovah's Witnesses report that the government also continues to deny citizenship to members of the community and refuses to meet with representatives to discuss these concerns. Some of the prisoners include 81-year-old Jehovah's Witness [Tesfazion Gebremichael](#), in prison for more than 12 years; [Yonatan Yonas](#) for 18 years; [Yosief Fessehaye](#) for 17 years; and [Samuel Girmay](#) for 14 years.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government has limited diplomatic relations with Eritrea, but U.S. diplomats continued to raise issues of human rights and freedom of religion or belief in official conversations with Asmara. However, the U.S. government is [attempting](#) to build stronger ties with Eritrea that would lessen the country's isolation and deny a foothold to U.S. competitors in the region. In this light, the United States [supported](#) regional efforts such as Eritrea's June [readmission](#) into the East Africa bloc (IGAD) after a 16-year absence.

In March 2023, the U.S. government [renewed](#) sanctions [imposed](#) in 2021 under Executive Order (E.O.) 13818, which builds upon and implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. One of those sanctioned, Filipos Woldeyohannes, is currently the chief of staff of the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF). Under his leadership, the EDF arrested and tortured Eritreans who fled military service in their country, including religious conscientious objectors.

In April 2023, the Eritrean government [released](#) a letter concerning broader U.S. foreign policy initiatives with the Afwerki regime. The letter called the initiatives a "Policy of Unremitting Hostility towards Eritrea." It noted further that the use of sanctions and punitive designations against the Eritrean government "waxes eloquent on human rights to vilify Eritrea in the most wicked terms and the document exists to advance [U.S.] perceived global interests at the expense of a sovereign nation."

On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA under the existing ongoing restrictions and sanctions referenced in [22 CFR 126.1](#), pursuant to Section 402(c)(5) of the act, for perpetrating particularly severe violations of religious freedom.