

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT 2003
JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES—ERITREA
July 1, 2002, to June 30, 2003

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In 1994, Eritrea's president decreed that Jehovah's Witnesses had revoked their citizenship by not participating in the national referendum and not participating in military service. He therefore decreed that Jehovah's Witnesses were not allowed to work in any government offices, revoked their business licenses, and rescinded their identity cards and travel documents. This has created great economic hardship and, in the case of some conscientious objectors, long-term imprisonment.

Approximately 250 families who are Jehovah's Witnesses have fled Eritrea and sought asylum outside the country. This has created multiple problems. Families are separated. Wives have fled the country along with their children seeking asylum outside the country while husbands were left behind. Often, the husbands have joined their families later and all ended up in refugee camps in neighboring countries seeking to be settled in a western country. Many succeeded in resettlement; some are still in refugee camps.

At least 100 Jehovah's Witnesses lost their employment because of their religion and this has affected at least 325 persons. Thirty-eight Jehovah's Witnesses were denied their business licenses. No national identity cards are issued to Jehovah's Witnesses. This means that Jehovah's Witnesses cannot have their marriages legalized. They cannot receive driver's licenses, passports or other travel documents. They cannot be employed by the government. Without documents, some have found it possible to do only manual, day-labor for around \$2.00 per day where questions are not asked.

At least 36 families have been expelled from their homes. Jehovah's Witnesses are denied the opportunity to rent government houses. Due to societal and governmental pressure, some landlords are not inclined to rent private premises to Witnesses. Some Witnesses went back to their villages from the larger cities seeking inexpensive housing. It is difficult for them to purchase land, as title deeds require identity cards for issuance. Non-Witness relatives generally do not welcome them back to their villages due to societal pressures.

There are 31 children who are Jehovah's Witnesses who are expelled from school. For Witness schoolchildren, education is possible up to the 12th grade. There are many pressures related to conscientious objection to military service that make expulsions likely. No tertiary education is possible due to the requirement of national military service. Even for secondary education, national military service is required before one can receive results of matriculation. Some Witness children remain for a year or two without education until their parents can get them into a private school.

- In May 2003, the Eritrean government denied visas to an attorney for Jehovah's Witnesses from the United States and a senior representative of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kenya when they attempted to travel to Asmara and meet with officials to discuss the ongoing problems facing Jehovah's Witnesses.

Conscientious Objection to Military Service

The national military service requirement has no regulations or provisions for conscientious objection. Most young men who are Jehovah's Witnesses between the ages of 18 and 40 are in hiding in their homes (a self-imposed house arrest) to avoid being arrested by the ever present MPs who patrol the streets. If arrested, they are taken to a military camp and detained with severe beatings and various forms of torture. It seems the practice of hiding such young people is common and widespread in Eritrean society.

- Ten men who are Jehovah's Witnesses are being held in the Sawa Prison Camp. Three of them have been imprisoned for almost nine years, i.e., since September 24, 1994. One of these three men has a certificate testifying to his successful completion of Eritrean "national service" before the military element was added to this service. The fourth Witness has been imprisoned since May 9, 2001. The remaining six Witnesses were imprisoned recently in 2003. Another Witness is being held in prison in Asmara.

Religious Persecution

The Eritrean government threatened action against all religious "sects" in the country. The government commanded the military police to close all meeting places of what they call religious "sects" and ordered them not to meet anymore. Only four major religions in the country are not affected. With this new development, some Jehovah's Witnesses whose homes have Kingdom Halls (houses of worship) in their compounds received letters from government officials to discontinue religious meetings in their homes or they would shut them down.

- On April 16, 2003, Jehovah's Witnesses in the Hadas Alem congregation in Asmara had just completed the Memorial celebration (an annual religious observance of the death of Jesus Christ) when the meeting place was surrounded by police. There were 164 in attendance, including children. All present were held in custody and interrogated throughout the night of April 16. In the afternoon of April 17 some children and some interested persons (non-Witnesses who were in attendance) were released.
- During the evening of April 17, 2003, the Witness prisoners were moved to the largest prison in Asmara. Male and female prisoners were separated. Police guards were posted outside the religious meeting place of Jehovah's Witnesses.
- On April 19, 2003, all children under the age of 15 and the rest of the interested persons (non-Witnesses who were in attendance) were released.
- On April 20, 2003, male and female Witness prisoners were separately moved to an undisclosed location outside Asmara.
- On April 24, 2003, another group of approximately 65 Witnesses was released. The police warned them not to hold religious meetings, and all those released had to sign a document acknowledging that meetings were being prohibited. Only five Witnesses of the group detained at the Memorial on April 16 remained in an undisclosed location.
- Finally, on May 14, after almost one month in detainment, the remaining five Witnesses (four men and one woman) were released.

August 1, 2003