



Universal Periodic Review 46th session – Stakeholder’s Report

Eritrea: Freedom of Religion or Belief

Joint Submission to the Human Rights Council’s

Universal Periodic Review Working Group, the 46th Session

Submission date: 10 October 2023

Submission by:

The World Evangelical Alliance

The Pentecostal World Fellowship

The Pentecostal Commission on Religious Liberty

The Anglican Consultative Council

The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) was founded in 1846 in London and has had special ECOSOC Consultative Status since 1997. Today, the WEA is a network of churches in 143 countries that have each formed an evangelical alliance and over 100 international organizations joining together to give a worldwide identity, voice, and platform to more than 600 million evangelical Christians.

The Pentecostal World Fellowship (PWF) is a cooperative body of Pentecostal churches and groups worldwide of approved standing. The members have different types of structures like Assemblies of God, Church of God, International Pentecostal Holiness Church, Foursquare, Church of God in Christ, and others. PWF has the largest covering of the different types of Pentecostals in the world.

The Pentecostal Commission on Religious Liberty (PCRL) is a joint venture of the PWF and WAGF to promote and protect religious liberty. The vision of PCRL is to see every Pentecostal church and believer be inspired, resourced, and challenged to foster and uphold religious freedom as defined by article XVIII of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in cooperation with the whole body of Christ. PCRL is representing about 100 million Pentecostals. According to the research of Todd Johnson, there were 118 million classical Pentecostals in 2018 in the world. Most of them are members of the PWF and WAGF denominations.

The Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) is an instrument of communion for the global Anglican Communion, which has member churches in more than 165 countries. The Anglican Consultative Council has had special ECOSOC Consultative Status since 1985.

For additional information, please contact the Geneva Office of the World Evangelical Alliance at geneva@worldea.org, or visit <https://un.worldea.org>

World Evangelical Alliance C/O RES CP 23, 1211 Geneva 8, Switzerland

Introduction

1. Since the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review, very little has changed with respect to the human rights situation in Eritrea. At the time of that UPR, on 19 August 2019, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, congratulated the government of Eritrea for signing a Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship with Ethiopia. The High Commissioner expressed hope that this would result in significant changes in Eritrea, particularly with respect to promotion and protection of human rights and the rule of law. Unfortunately, that has not been the result. Instead, the situation remains very similar for the fourth cycle as for the third cycle.
2. The Constitution of 23 May 1997 has not been implemented. Chapter III of the Constitution of 1997 provides strong protection for human rights. Article 19 guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and belief and the right to practice and manifest one's beliefs. Despite H.E. President Isaias Afwerki's announcement in 2014 that a new constitution would be drafted, that also has not occurred.
3. The government recognizes only four officially registered religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea.ⁱ In 2002, the government imposed a registration system for all other religious groups.ⁱⁱ However, after the churches and religious organisations submitted the required documents, the government did not register them. Thereafter, Church leaders from other Christian traditions, and anyone sharing their faith or religious literature from other Christian traditions, has been subject to being arrested and detained.
4. A recent report indicates that 13 Christians were released in early August.ⁱⁱⁱ Each of these had been imprisoned for more than 10 years. We applaud the Eritrean government for releasing these Christians. More remain in jail, however.
5. We note that Eritrea is a member of the Human Rights Council. It ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (2002) and the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (2001). Eritrea has also ratified the Covenant against Torture and other Cruel Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (2014). As is documented below, Eritrea appears to be violating its obligations under these important Conventions.

Detentions on the basis of religion

6. The Commission on the Human Rights situation in Eritrea reported in 2015 on the significant violations of religious freedom for churches and leaders of those churches since 2002.^{iv} Churches were closed. Gatherings of adherents were banned. Leaders and adherents were arrested and imprisoned without charge or trial. The Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea reported that these leaders were still in jail without charge in 2015 and nothing has changed in the intervening years.^v The World Evangelical Alliance no longer has a member alliance in Eritrea as it is a banned organisation. Its leadership is either imprisoned or live as refugees in other countries.

7. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea stated in his report in 2020, "Since May 2019, the Eritrean authorities have carried out a crackdown on non-recognized Christian congregations."^{vi} We note that Eritrea became a member of the Human Rights Council in 2018, and therefore should have been respecting the highest level of human rights protection.
8. We note that detention conditions are reported to be horrific, including long periods of solitary confinement in complete darkness and detention in shipping containers. This is well documented^{vii} and violates the human rights of those detained, often without charge.
9. Dr. Kiflu Gemremeskel^{viii} has been in prison in Eritrea since May 2004. Before his arrest, he was the Chair of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance. In 1999, Dr. Kiflu left his academic position as faculty head of the University of Asmara to be full-time pastor of the Southwest Full Gospel Church. It was part of a network of 150 Pentecostal house churches called the Full Gospel Church of Eritrea. In May 2003, those churches were closed by government decree and given an application to register. While the registration was filed immediately, there was no reply from the government. Dr. Kiflu was arrested in a 5 am raid on his home in the capital Asmara on 23 May 2004. It is believed that he is being held in Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation Interrogation Center.
10. Along with Dr. Kiflu, two other leaders of the Full Gospel Church of Eritrea were arrested with him. Rev Haile Naizghe^{ix} was chair of the Full Gospel Church. It is believed that he is being held in Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation Interrogation Center. Pastor Tesfatsion Hagos^x was the pastor of Rhema Evangelical Church in Asmara. He was released in 2010 due to ill health and has left the country.
11. On 3 June 2004, another Pentecostal leader was arrested, Pastor Meron Gebreselasie.^{xi} He was the pastor of Massawa Rhema Evangelical Church. He was arrested at a police checkpoint outside of Asmara. It is believed that he is being held in Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation Interrogation Center.
12. On 18 March 2005, Pastor Kidane Weldou,^{xii} pastor of the Full Gospel Church, was forcibly disappeared from Asmara. His car was found abandoned. It is believed that he is being held in Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation Interrogation Center.
13. Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported to the Human Rights Council in March 2023 that 150 Christians were detained in Asmara in September 2022, 98 of whom remain in Mai Serwa prison. In January 2023, a further 44 were detained in Mai Serwa prison.^{xiii} The horrific conditions of this prison are detailed in the Report of the detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea. This includes detention in shipping containers with extreme variations in temperature, sometimes kept in complete darkness and subject to torture.^{xiv}
14. Release International reported on 24 April 2023 that 103 Christian students were detained in Mai Serwa prison for gathering to sing and record video messages for social media.^{xv}
15. Most of those detained for their faith are not charged with a crime. They are held in appalling conditions, including overcrowding and torture. Those detained do not have access to legal representation or due process of law. When some Christians are released from detention, other Christians are detained.

Recommendations

16. We urge the government of Eritrea to live up to the obligations it took on by ratifying United Nations Conventions that require it to observe human rights standards in relation to its citizens: specifically, 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.
17. We urge the government of Eritrea to allow religious communities to register in accordance with international law.
18. We plead with the government to immediately release the prisoners currently detained for their religious beliefs and practices and put an end to detention on the basis of religion.
19. We encourage the government to implement the 1997 Constitution. This will include establishing the National Assembly, the Executive and independence and impartiality of the Judiciary. It will also include promoting and protecting human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief.
20. We urge the government to extend a standing invitation to UN thematic special procedures to visit Eritrea and assist the government to move towards compliance with international law in its application of the rule of law, human rights and refugee law, particularly the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

- ⁱ Sheila B. Keetharuth, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Human Rights Council, 23rd session, A/HRC/23/53, 28 May 2013. Online: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G13/140/99/PDF/G1314099.pdf?OpenElement> [accessed 3 July 2023], p. 13.
- ⁱⁱ Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, Report of the detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, Human Rights Council, 29th session, A/HRC/29/CRP.1, 5 June 2015. Online: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A_HRC_29_CRP-1.pdf [accessed 3 July 2023], p. 160.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Voice of the Martyrs, “13 Eritrean Christians Released from Jail,” 9 August 2023. Online: <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/13-eritrean-christians-released-from-prison-301897004.html> [accessed 23 August 2023].
- ^{iv} Ibid, pp. 166-169.
- ^v Ibid, p. 246.
- ^{vi} Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Human rights situation in Eritrea, Human Rights Council, 44th session, 15 June–3 July 2020, A/HRC/44/23. Online: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/111/87/PDF/G2011187.pdf?OpenElement> [accessed 5 July 2023], p. 9.
- ^{vii} Ibid., pp. 221-310.
- ^{viii} Enduring Hope Network, “Kiflu Gemremeskel.” Online: <https://www.enduringhopenetwork.org/2019/05/28/kiflu-gebremeskel/> [accessed 30 June 2023].
- ^{ix} Enduring Hope Network, “Kiflu Gemremeskel.” Online: <https://www.enduringhopenetwork.org/2019/05/28/kiflu-gebremeskel/> [accessed 30 June 2023].
- ^x Enduring Hope Network, “Kiflu Gemremeskel.” Online: <https://www.enduringhopenetwork.org/2019/05/28/kiflu-gebremeskel/> [accessed 30 June 2023].
- ^{xi} Human Rights Without Frontiers, *In Prison for their Faith 2020*. Online: https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/In-Prison-for-Their-Faith_Full.pdf (accessed 30 June 2023), p. 104; Church in Chains, “Meron Gebreselasie.” Online: <https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/meron-gebreselasie/> [accessed 30 June 2023].
- ^{xii} The Voice of the Martyrs, “Kidane Weldou.” Online: <https://www.prisoneralert.com/prisoners/146/kidane-weldou> [accessed 30 June 2023].

Xiii

- Christian Solidarity Worldwide, HRC52: Oral statement on the situation of human rights in Eritrea. 6 March 2023. Online: <https://www.csw.org.uk/2023/03/06/report/5948/article.htm> [accessed 30 June 2023].
- ^{xiv} Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, Report of the detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, Human Rights Council, 29th session, A/HRC/29/CRP.1, 5 June 2015. Online: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColEritrea/A_HRC_29_CRP-1.pdf [accessed 3 July 2023], pp. 236-238.
- ^{xv} Release International, Eritrea Arrests 103 Christians. 24 April 2023. Online: <https://releaseinternational.org/eritrea-arrests-103-christians/> [accessed 30 June 2023].