

CRIMES AGAINST CHRISTIANITY SERIES 1

ERITREA

The North Korea of Africa

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

International Christian Concern (ICC) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that focuses on the persecution of Christians in foreign countries. Recognizing that persecution is a multifaceted problem that requires a comprehensive solution, ICC has developed a unique approach focused on assistance, advocacy, and awareness. ICC comes alongside persecuted Christians in their time of greatest need and builds the Church in the most dangerous parts of the world.

One of the most devastating issues in the world currently is the persecution of Christians by dictatorial rulers, including Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea. Holding the presidency of Eritrea since the country's independence in 1993, Afwerki has reached his 31st year as president. Under his rule, thousands of people have died during a 30-year war, been imprisoned because of their religious beliefs, and fled the country to escape the oppressive regime. Conditions in the "North Korea of Africa" have deteriorated with no acceptance of blame from Afwerki. This report provides a concise yet robust historical and current overview of Christian persecution, two case studies of Christians in Eritrea, and policy recommendations. Through this report, ICC intends to raise awareness of the plight of Christians in Eritrea and recommend ways government leaders can alleviate their suffering.

Christianity has been present and growing throughout Eritrea's history, and most of the country's population identifies as Christian. Beginning with Semitic immigrants in 1000 BCE¹, Eritrea is a country included in the birthplaces of Christianity. In contrast to other African nations, the colonization of Eritrea bolstered the nation's economy. Years of conflict and intervention by foreign nations led to the rule of Isaias Afwerki and his allyship with several repressive regimes.

Throughout his presidency, Afwerki has clamped down on political and religious freedoms. Those who worship outside the narrow confines established by the government face severe penalties, including torture, imprisonment, and even death.

Two case studies in this report document real stories of persecution perpetuated by the Eritrean government. Stories such as that of Pastor M and Dr. K (pseudonyms are used to protect their identities) provide an up close and personal examination of the violence Christians face daily in Eritrea.

¹History of Christianity: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Eritrea/Religion>

HISTORY OF ERITREA

Eritrea is a small country in the Horn of Africa just north of Ethiopia and shares a border with Ethiopia, Sudan, and Djibouti with a strategic location along the Red Sea. The first documented history of Eritrea² begins with Semitic invaders coming from southern Arabia in 1000 BCE. The Semitic invaders established the kingdom of Aksum, which expanded across the northern plains of the Ethiopian Plateau and the eastern lowlands. The Aksum empire hit its peak alongside the establishment of Christianity in Eritrea in the 4th century. The Aksum kingdom eventually dissipated and gave way to the Ethiopian Zagwe and Solomonid dynasties, which ruled in tandem with Ethiopian kingdoms until the 16th century when the Ottomans invaded, occupying much of the coastal regions of modern-day Eritrea. Christianity remained the dominant religion in the country despite the arrival of Islam in the 7th century. However, invasions in the 16th century conducted by Ahmad Gran³, the Muslim leader of the sultanate of Adal, modern-day Somalia, resulted in the death of thousands, including many Christian church leaders. Following these attacks, Islam grew significantly in the region, leaving the population in the following years split nearly half Christian and half Muslim.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 made Eritrea's location on the Red Sea even more desirable. Italian forces took

advantage of the relative weakness of the Eritrean government and invaded the land off the coast. The Italians began to systematically move further inland, eventually claiming colonial control over Eritrea on January 1, 1890. Throughout the occupation of Eritrea by Italy, there were many technological and economic advances. Because a vast portion of Eritrea lacked development due to the lack of resources, subsidies by the Italian government provided for the development of rural landscapes. However, colonization also brought hardship for the Eritreans, including lack of education, employment solely as laborers or soldiers, and the use of Eritreans as pawns in Italian conflicts.

Following the eviction of Italy from the Horn of Africa in 1941 during World War II, the territory of Eritrea transitioned from Italian rule to Ethiopian rule. Ethiopia made an official move to annex Eritrea with the support of the Allied powers. However, Muslims in Eritrea fought against this effort through the creation of a Muslim League, which campaigned for Eritrean independence. Conflict ensued between the Ethiopian government and Muslim groups, eventually resulting in the development of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). The ELF was a Muslim-led guerrilla force that began a war lasting 30 years. To suppress Muslim groups and Eritrean nationalism, the Ethiopian government

banned Tigrinya, the language spoken by a majority of native Eritreans, in schools; this encouraged Christians toward nationalism. The ELF then developed into the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Despite numerous complications during the 30-year war, including involvement from the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Eritrea eventually voted for independence in a referendum in April 1993.

Isaias Afwerki became the first president of Eritrea in 1993 through a popular election. Afwerki has served Eritrea in various roles throughout his life, including leading military efforts with the EPLF during the 30-year conflict with Ethiopia, eventually bringing forth his leadership as president, where he gained control of the executive and legislative branches⁴. Afwerki took extreme steps in his first term as president, namely canceling elections in 1997, effectively closing the national press in 2001, having several opposition leaders arrested and charged with treason, and enforcing mandatory indefinite conscription for all citizens of Eritrea.

Originally, Eritrea intended to hold presidential elections every five years. However, Afwerki changed the regulations surrounding term limits, meaning his election in 1993 was the only election the country has ever held.

CURRENT SITUATION

Eritrea does not have an official constitution implemented. However, the drafted constitution "prohibits religiously motivated discrimination and provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as the freedom to practice any religion," according to the U.S. International Religious Freedom Report of 2022². The Eritrean government officially recognizes the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. Reliable population data in Eritrea is difficult to obtain, demonstrated by the approximately 3-million-person disparity in population estimates by

the United States versus the United Nations. The Pew Foundation, however, estimates 63% of the Eritrean population is Christian and 37% Muslim in a 2010 study, which is the most recent reliable information. Anyone caught worshipping outside these groups is swiftly dealt with, as are those within the approved groups who challenge the government in any way.

Despite the rich history of Christianity and the provisions in the drafted constitution for religious freedom, government actors continue to persecute Christians. Laws affecting religious minorities include Article 196 of the

MOST RECENT STATS⁵

Population: 3,684,032

Life Expectancy: 67

Human Capital Index (scale 0-4): N/A

GDP Per Capita: \$643.80

Poverty Percentage: 50% (as of 2004)

Official Language: Tigrinya, Arabic, and English

Religious Breakdown⁶:

- Christian: 63%
- Muslim: 37%

Eritrean Penal Code, which condemns “Disturbance of Religious or Ethnic Feelings.” This law criminalizes public ridicule of a ceremony or rite of any recognized religious group⁸. Violators can serve 6 to 12 months in prison.

Perhaps even more concerning is Proclamation Number 73 of 1995, which gives government officials control over religious activities. All religious groups are required to register with the government. The combination of these two factors leads to hundreds of arrests each year. Currently, the estimate of prisoners without a trial or even a crime charged to their name is approximately 500, with hundreds more imprisoned with charges such as blasphemy or apostasy.

Since the 2022 registration requirement came into existence, no religious group has passed the registration process. For now, all religious activity outside of the highly regulated official state religions is still illegal. Christians caught conducting religious activities, even something as simple as a Bible study at home, can be arrested, subjected to torture and possibly executed under charges of treason. Once in prison, Eritreans face arguably worse treatment. Reports from former prisoners include physical abuse, sexual violence, torture, denial of medical treatment, and the withholding of fundamental human rights. While in detention, officials restrict prisoners from praying aloud, singing, preaching, and possessing religious texts. Additionally, many prisoners report that authorities hold inmates in metal shipping containers without ventilation, proper toilets, sleeping arrangements, clothing, or food. Many die after con-

tracting diseases or complications due to overcrowding.

In addition to harsh prison treatment, the government uses the military and national isolation as prominent forms of persecution. Considering universal conscription into the military, it is worth noting that government violations of religious freedom are particularly severe in the armed forces. The military bans armed forces members from attending Protestant prayer meetings and subject them to punishment by imprisonment. Armed forces members and national service inductees reportedly face severe punishment for possessing religious literature, including Bibles.

In addition to these abuses, the Eritrean government is gradually pushing out humanitarian organizations that bring aid to the country. Officials have asked 11 organizations to leave in the last year. The government continues to isolate itself, which in turn further isolates Christians and limits their opportunities to receive help. The systematic oppression has created such a desperate situation for Christians in Eritrea that they have become easy targets for traffickers in East Africa.

When discussing Eritrea, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Commissioner Thomas Reese said, “Eritrea remains one of the worst examples of state-sponsored repression of freedom of religion or belief in the world Eritrean authorities conducted waves of door-to-door searches and arrests of individuals because of their religious identity, and increased oppression of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian communities.”

AFWERKI’S RESPONSE TO EXTERNAL CRITICISM

Despite continual claims of human rights violations, United Nations sanctions against Eritrea, documentation provided by the African Union, and other evidence, Afwerki refuses to acknowledge culpability. In an interview with Al Jazeera in 2010⁹, Afwerki said any claims of wrongdoing by his government were “false” or “a joke.” When asked about his goals and the future of Eritrea, Afwerki said, “At least we will not be like Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan. We are better off. We are number one on this continent.” Despite Afwerki belittling other parts of Africa, online responses to the Al Jazeera interview were favorable: “From Somalia in 2023, we support this King of Africa,” wrote one fan of Afwerki.

When asked about the Eritrean government’s alleged support of al-Shabab rebels in Somalia, Afwerki responded, “In our political culture, we’ve never believed, and we don’t believe religion is an alternative or substitute for political, social, economic problems in any one country or any one society. We’ve never entertained the idea of Sharia being a solution or Islam being a solution as many may like to appreciate.”

Despite decades under a brutal, authoritarian dictator and thousands fleeing the country and seeking refuge elsewhere, many Eritreans deny any wrongdoing on the part of the government. Often referred to as “the North Korea of Africa,” it is clear that the control and wrath of Isaias Afwerki affect the lives of millions of Eritreans, including millions of Christians.

² History of Eritrea: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Eritrea/Religion>

³ Ahmad Gran: https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ahmad_ibn_ibrihim_al-Ghazi

⁴ Isaias Afwerki Modern Information: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/about/archives/2021/countries/eritrea/>

⁴ Isaias Afwerki Modern Information: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/about/archives/2021/countries/eritrea/>

⁵ Statistics from World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/eritrea>

⁶ Religious Demographics: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/>

⁷ Constitution Information: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/>

⁸ Blasphemy Laws: <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-01/2023%20Blasphemy%20Law%20Compendium.pdf>

⁹ Isaias Afwerki Interview with Al Jazeera: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOuQwODNkTA&t=419s>

CASE STUDIES



DR. K

Dr. K has been in prison in Eritrea for 20 years without charge or trial. He is now 69 years old. His family, which includes his wife, one daughter, two sons, and a 14-month-old grandson, currently resides in multiple nations and cannot visit or contact Dr. K. The family knows very little about Dr. K's situation in prison due to the lack of contact. His daughter, Maria, is aware that Dr. K shares a cell with other pastors who were similarly never convicted. In 2019, the prison started placing tighter restrictions on the inmates, confiscating all personal belongings and not allowing access to religious texts. Luckily, the pastors have memorized most of the Bible and can encourage each other through the word of God. Maria sadly reports that some of the pastors have suffered severe mental struggles due to the prolonged isolation. In addition to the tangible absence of their father, Dr. K's children have found difficulty in international travel to Eritrea due to visa restrictions. Additionally, if a prisoner is ever released, both families and prisoners will be watched by the government for the remainder of their lives.



PASTOR M

Pastor M was living in Asmara when there was an attack on his home, and all his religious materials were stolen and destroyed. Attempting to flee the country, Pastor M traveled on foot to the border despite the publication of his picture in all the police departments throughout the country. Pastor M witnessed the killing of several people as he waited for the right moment to get smuggled across. Border security has increased in the past several months after Russia gave military weapons to the government in 2023. Fearing for his life, Pastor M reluctantly returned to Asmara, where he had to hide in the mountains, only able to go home for a few hours each night to retrieve goods. Pastor M is severely malnourished and has lost a substantial portion of his weight. According to one source, "He is encouraged and knows that the Lord still wants him in Eritrea, although he is exhausted and doesn't want to be imprisoned again." Pastor M hopes to find a new rental home to escape fear.

ADVOCACY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing the complexity of the relationship between Eritrea and the United States, some advocacy and policy efforts may benefit the conditions of Christians. While all the suggestions below affect Eritrea, many encourage the United States to build rapport with neighboring nations to influence the authoritarian regime. In examining actors such as Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un, and Vladimir Putin, the recommendations propose actions that have proven effective in interacting with dictators.

Continue designating Eritrea as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) in 2024 under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

- The CPC designation allows the United States to take actions, including placing economic sanctions on Eritrea, withholding scientific advances, or simply taking a private demarche. While acknowledging the severe human rights violations, this designation does not require extreme intervention by the United States.

Attempt to engage with Isaias Afwerki, establishing common ground in any way possible.

- Although engaging with Afwerki has proven extremely difficult, establishing a neutral relationship with dictators has proven a prudent and effective method of furthering the goal of democratization while not condoning the actions of our enemies.

Further the spread of information regarding the reality of the situation in Eritrea.

- Looking at the situation in North Korea, spreading information regarding the actual conditions of living in the country has provided empathy and allyship against an oppressive regime throughout the world.

Encourage other African nations to recognize the danger of the dictatorial style of regime in Eritrea.

- While many African nations have found stability and success following a period of colonization, many others have fought through multiple coups, corruption, and war. These countries who have experienced struggles are relatively young in terms of their governments. Educating the leaders may benefit the United States by demonstrating the negative impact of relations with authoritarian regimes.

Ally with nations neighboring Eritrea to prevent the spread of authoritarianism through allies of Eritrea, including China, Syria, Iran, and Russia¹⁰.

- As the influence of China and Russia continues to increase throughout Africa, it is advantageous for the United States to ally with as many African nations as possible before the domination of additional authoritarian regimes corrupt thriving democracies.

Continue documenting the persecution of Christians and spreading awareness regarding the harsh imprisonments within Eritrea.

- Educating the world on the persecution of Christians allows for more specified care for those suffering violations of universal human rights. Through international awareness and pressure demonstrated by petitions and letters to prisoners, ICC has seen notable change from oppressive regimes. Praying for Christians and recognizing the suffering of other humans continues to be proven beneficial in the lives of millions.




Enforce Eritrean government reforms of its judicial and penal systems to ease the unjust impact they have on prisoners of conscience.

- Maintaining international guidelines for the treatment of prisoners will ultimately benefit Christians, as a large portion of the prisoners held in Eritrea are held without charge or trial.

¹⁰ Alliance with Foreign Powers: <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/03/08/why-is-eritrea-backing-russian-aggression-in-ukraine>

CONTACT: This report is published by International Christian Concern’s Advocacy department. If you would like to get in touch with ICC’s Advocacy department, please contact advocacy@persecution.org. All other inquiries, please contact icc@persecution.org.

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OUR MISSION: Since 1996, ICC has served the global persecuted church through a three-pronged approach of advocacy, awareness, and assistance. ICC exists to bandage the wounds of persecuted Christians and to build the church in the toughest parts of the world.

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