



ERITREA: Country Dossier

April 2018



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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World Watch List 2018

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	92	92	92	90
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	89	88	81	78
3	Somalia	16.0	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4	10.4	91	91	87	90	80
4	Sudan	14.2	14.5	14.3	15.6	16.0	12.0	87	87	84	80	73
5	Pakistan	14.4	13.5	13.8	15.0	13.1	16.7	86	88	87	79	77
6	Eritrea	15.2	14.5	15.8	16.1	15.2	9.4	86	82	89	79	72
7	Libya	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.7	15.5	10.4	86	78	79	76	71
8	Iraq	14.7	14.7	14.9	14.9	15.1	11.3	86	86	90	86	78
9	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.4	16.5	16.7	2.6	85	85	78	73	74
10	Iran	14.0	14.1	14.5	15.8	16.4	10.0	85	85	83	80	77
11	India	12.6	12.7	13.2	14.7	12.9	14.4	81	73	68	62	55
12	Saudi Arabia	14.9	13.7	14.2	15.5	16.4	4.1	79	76	76	77	78
13	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.8	16.7	1.1	78	76	76	78	77
14	Nigeria	11.8	11.5	13.1	12.1	12.1	16.5	77	78	78	78	70
15	Syria	14.4	14.3	14.1	14.5	14.7	3.7	76	86	87	83	79
16	Uzbekistan	15.5	12.1	13.0	13.1	16.0	3.5	73	71	70	69	68
17	Egypt	11.3	12.8	12.2	11.7	9.5	12.4	70	65	64	61	61
18	Vietnam	12.4	8.4	12.7	14.2	13.8	7.4	69	71	66	68	65
19	Turkmenistan	15.2	10.3	12.9	12.8	15.2	1.9	68	67	66	63	62
20	Laos	12.9	8.6	13.6	13.9	14.9	3.5	67	64	58	58	62
21	Jordan	13.2	13.3	11.5	10.9	13.0	4.3	66	63	59	56	56
22	Tajikistan	13.3	11.3	11.8	11.8	12.9	4.3	65	58	58	50	47
23	Malaysia	12.0	14.9	12.8	12.4	9.3	3.9	65	60	58	55	49
24	Myanmar	11.6	11.1	13.2	10.4	11.0	7.8	65	62	62	60	59
25	Nepal	12.6	11.9	10.7	11.5	12.4	4.6	64		(not in WWL)		
26	Brunei	14.3	14.2	10.7	10.2	13.5	0.9	64	64	61	58	57
27	Qatar	13.4	12.9	11.7	11.3	14.1	0.0	63	66	65	64	63
28	Kazakhstan	12.8	10.0	10.2	12.2	13.7	3.7	63	56	55	51	49
29	Ethiopia	9.8	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.5	10.4	62	64	67	61	65
30	Tunisia	11.9	13.2	10.6	10.7	12.0	3.9	62	61	58	55	55
31	Turkey	12.5	9.7	9.8	11.7	9.6	8.7	62	57	55	52	(not in WWL)
32	Kenya	12.0	10.9	10.0	7.9	11.7	9.4	62	68	68	63	48
33	Bhutan	11.9	11.6	12.4	11.4	13.1	1.1	62	61	56	56	54
34	Kuwait	13.4	12.6	11.6	10.9	12.3	0.4	61	57	56	49	50
35	Central African Republic	9.0	8.1	10.1	8.9	8.8	16.1	61	58	59	67	67
36	Palestinian Territories	12.1	12.8	10.7	10.5	12.6	1.1	60	64	62	58	53
37	Mali	11.4	9.6	11.2	8.1	9.2	9.6	59	59	55	52	54
38	Indonesia	10.3	11.0	11.5	10.0	9.3	6.9	59	55	55	50	46
39	Mexico	8.3	7.6	12.1	10.7	9.7	10.4	59	57	56	55	(not in WWL)
40	United Arab Emirates	13.6	12.2	10.0	10.4	11.8	0.2	58	55	55	49	51
41	Bangladesh	10.4	8.8	11.4	9.6	7.5	10.0	58	63	57	51	46
42	Algeria	12.3	13.1	7.5	10.4	12.4	2.0	58	58	56	55	54
43	China	9.2	7.2	8.0	10.7	13.3	9.1	57	57	57	57	51
44	Sri Lanka	11.1	7.6	10.5	11.3	10.1	6.9	57	55	(not in WWL)	51	55
45	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.1	9.3	11.1	12.4	2.4	57	(not in WWL)	57	50	(not in WWL)
46	Oman	12.1	12.2	9.9	9.4	12.6	1.1	57	53	53	55	56
47	Mauritania	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2	11.0	0.0	57	55	(not in WWL)	50	51
48	Bahrain	12.9	13.1	10.2	9.9	10.3	0.2	57	54	54	(not in WWL)	48
49	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.9	8.6	8.5	11.9	56	53	55	55	56
50	Djibouti	12.2	12.2	10.3	9.9	11.7	0.0	56	57	58	60	46

WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries¹

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.4	13.9	0.4	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	11.7	9.5	10.0	8.1	11.6	2.8	54
53	Tanzania	10.1	10.3	10.1	9.5	9.0	3.9	53
54	Russian Federation	11.1	8.4	10.1	8.9	10.7	2.0	51
55	Morocco	10.4	11.5	7.6	8.8	12.0	0.6	51
56	Cuba	8.5	4.9	10.7	10.4	12.2	2.4	49
57	Uganda	10.9	8.7	9.5	8.7	4.8	3.9	46
58	Niger	9.9	9.7	9.0	7.0	7.1	2.6	45

¹ These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

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Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)¹ including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))². Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)³ and WWR staff.

ERITREA		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	86	6
WWL 2017	82	10
WWL 2016	89	3
WWL 2015	79	9
WWL 2014	72	12

¹ See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

² WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

³ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

WWL 2018: Keys to understanding ERITREA

Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13349078>

Recent country history

President Isaias Afewerki has governed Eritrea since it became an independent country in 1993. His People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) is the sole political party and has been facing serious pressure from the international community due to its human rights record. The country's economy is stagnant and thousands are fleeing the country. This led to a failed coup in January 2013 when a group of military officers tried to take control of state media. According to UN experts, this was a serious indication that the situation in the country might get even worse: "The failed military uprising of 21 January 2013 is the most serious indication yet of permanent cracks emerging within the regime. The evolving power struggle for control of the military steering committee has taken place amid growing tensions between Afwerki's ultra-loyalists, such as General Manjus, and regional military commanders, notably former regional military commander Filipos Woldeyohannes, who is known to have entertained contacts with individuals involved in staging the events of 21 January 2013 and whose relations with President Afwerki have soured since 2012."⁴ Lately, the country has been trying to amend its relationship with the international community. At the same time, the tension between Djibouti and Eritrea is rising after Qatar pulled out its peacekeepers from the disputed borders between Eritrea and Djibouti in June 2017. At the time of writing (July 2017) [Djibouti is asking the African Union](#) to deploy observers along its disputed borders with Eritrea.

The religious landscape

To understand today's religious landscape it is necessary to look at Eritrea's history. Christianity dominated the life of Eritreans for many centuries. Islam was introduced by Arabs to the coastal areas of the Red Sea during the 7th century. The establishment of a garrison around Massawa by the Turks in 1557 effectively made Eritrea a colony of the Ottoman Empire.⁵ In 1860s, Egyptian rulers bought the port of Massawa from the Turks, and made it their seat of local government. In 1890, Italy claimed ownership of Eritrea as a colony. The presence of Turks and Egypt had made Muslims in the coastal area very powerful. The highlanders (the Christians), though, gained some ground when Eritrea became an Italian colony. Italy was defeated in World War II, and Great Britain took control of Eritrea in 1941. In 1952, the United Nations decided to make Eritrea a federal component of Ethiopia. The federal structure was later abolished by the Ethiopian king to effectively make Eritrea a part of Ethiopia (Unitary form of government), declaring Eritrea one of the provinces (not a federal state). This led to the formation of the Eritrean liberation movement. Overwhelmingly led by lowland Muslims, the liberation movement declared its intention to form a republic. As most

⁴ See http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913, last accessed 11 June 2017.

⁵ See <http://mandalaprojects.com/ice/ice-cases/eritrea.htm>, last accessed 10 June 2017.

of the Eritrean Orthodox Christians had a strong relationship with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, they saw the move by Muslims as dangerous. Some of the fundamentalist Muslims also regarded the Orthodox Christians as a major threat to the cause of independence. Since this time both are suspicious of each other.

The political landscape

Eritrea's socio-political dynamics, civil liberties and political system are all dominated by President Isayas Afewerki. As long as Eritrea has existed – since 1991 (de facto) - he has been the ruler of the country. Afewerki's party –the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) - is the only legal political entity in the country and maintains a non-democratic Marxist-Leninist political ideology. This militaristic ideological platform is based both on Eritrea's "liberation struggle" against Ethiopia –which lasted from 1961 to 1991 - and Afewerki's personality cult, leading to one of the most sustained dictatorships in Africa. Within this context, many Eritreans (including both Muslims and Christians) perceive Eritrea's national identity as more important than individual rights and ethnicity. The government's promotion of this national ideology has helped to channel potential social and ethnic-based conflicts into social harmony and has thus helped avoid any major social upheaval and conflict. However, the ruling elite are mostly from the Tigrinya ethnic group.

In terms of civil liberties, Western governments and human rights organizations consider Eritrea one of the most repressive countries in the world, similar to North Korea, Turkmenistan, and Iran. For example, political protest is not allowed and the press is restricted to the point that there are no independent media organizations in the country. Those perceived as belonging to the opposition or as a threat to Eritrea's stability are detained and treated harshly. It [is estimated that Eritrea has over 300](#) official and unofficial sites where approximately more than 20,000 people are held in detention without trial and without contact to the outside world. Consistent with this, there are also no free and fair elections in the country or other civil or political rights. In one of the most intense interviews he ever held with main stream media, President Afewerki told an Al-Jazeera reporter, "There is no commodity called democracy in Eritrea."⁶

These restrictions on internationally recognized human rights (including freedom of religion) are justified by the government on the grounds that these rights form an existential threat to social and religious harmony in the country. This means that the introduction of non-indigenous types of Christianity (i.e. non-traditional Protestants such as Pentecostals) or certain forms of Islam such as Salafism will be seen as a potential threat to Eritrean society. Moreover, it seems that especially ethnic Tigrinya find the sacrifice of civil and political rights for the sake of internal stability and protection from Ethiopia acceptable.

Eritrea has allegedly been involving itself in other countries' domestic affairs in the region. Eritrea has been accused of supporting terrorist groups in Somalia and elsewhere by the international community. In 2006, a UN Monitoring Group report stated, that "the

⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yO1EkKq8q1E>, last accessed 12 June 2017.

Government of Eritrea provided at least 28 separate consignments of arms, ammunition and military equipment. It also provided troops and training to ICU in Somalia.”⁷

The UN Monitoring Group has also observed “emerging fissures within the political and military leadership in Eritrea within the context of growing discontent in government circles over Eritrea’s international isolation, the arbitrary detention of thousands of prisoners and the non-transparent management of hundreds of millions of dollars of revenues obtained from mining production.”⁸ The Monitoring Group has published documentation on “a number of high-level defections of military and government officials. These are taking place amid continuing waves of emigration of Eritrea’s youth as well as defections from the ranks of national service conscripts, a vast number of whom are required to serve indefinitely.”⁹ Eritreans keep fleeing the country even via treacherous routes. In 2014/15 Eritreans were second only to Syrians in the numbers terms of asylum seeking political asylum in Europe.

The socio-economic landscape

The ruling party and the military are crucial players in the economic system Eritrea has adopted. They own farms, banks, and other commercial establishments. Ordinary citizens may make some money as subsistence farmers and herders, or by selling livestock to those interested in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) cannot operate independently as their finances need to be channelled through the government, which itself faces high levels of corruption. Eritrea receives virtually no international aid from the West because of its pariah status as a human rights-abuser. Having said this, it is the policy of the government not to rely on outside sources, to be self-reliant in economic terms, and shape its economic fortunes itself. However, Gulf countries (including Iran) and China invest in the country and supplement the national budget. Through the wise investment in the establishment of key infrastructure such as power plants, dams, roads, and social services (schools, medical clinics and clean water), Eritrea experienced a 7-10% growth after independence. This investment was stifled after the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia as more of its resources were channelled to national defence. Having said this, the numbers of HIV/AIDS patients are among the lowest in Sub-Saharan Africa and life expectancy is in the top ten of all African states. This shows paradoxically, that the policy mix of grim government repression and economic self-reliance does lead to some positive results.

Concluding remarks

Eritrea is a country that has been facing many challenges. Poverty and security are among the main issues. The number of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, and beyond clearly indicates that many Eritreans are deeply dissatisfied with the current regime and the living conditions in the country. On foreign policy and aid, the Eritrean regime will continue its cooperation with China, Iran and Gulf countries and will resist pressure from the West to open up its doors to Western NGOs, including Christian organizations. The regime will doubtless continue to violate the human rights of the citizens and suppress in this process those forms of

⁷ See http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2006/913, last accessed 11 June 2017.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Christianity and Islam, which are not perceived as indigenous, in an attempt to foster social harmony. This could play into the hands of those Muslim groups aiming to further a radical Islamic agenda. However, it could equally well weaken the Orthodox Church and suffocate Christians of non-traditional Protestant dominations and their ability to reach out to Eritrean Muslims. The report by the UN Commission of Inquiry in 2015 also says that the country is [“being ruled by fear, not law.”](#)

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
5,482,000	2,540,000	46.3%

Source: WCD, May 2017

How did Christians get there?

Christianity entered Eritrea more than a thousand years ago. “The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church traces its history to the founding of the Coptic Orthodox Church and its separation in the 5th century from the larger body of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Like the Ethiopians, the Eritrean church recognizes Frumentius (4th century) as its first bishop and it follows the beliefs and practices of [the] Ethiopian [Orthodox].”¹⁰

In 1864, Protestantism entered Eritrea via three missionaries belonging to the Swedish Evangelical Mission (representing Lutheranism). As their original plan to go to Ethiopia was blocked, the missionaries decided to stay in Eritrea and started working with the Kunama¹¹ people.¹² According to sources, the church established by the three missionaries “became self-governing in 1926, the first autonomous Lutheran body in Africa.”¹³

In the modern era, many other Protestant and Free Church bodies entered Eritrea: “Following WWII, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Evangelistic Faith Missions (an American-based sending agency) initiated work in Eritrea. The latter established what has become the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. A year after the declaration of independence in 1993, the Southern Baptist Convention initiated work. These groups all now work outside the official regulations.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Melton J.G. and Baumann M. (editors), *Religions of the world*, 2010, p.993.

¹¹ The Kunama People are an ethnic group (Nilotic), the majority of whom live in Eritrea. They also live in Ethiopia.

¹² Connell D. and Killio T., *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea* p.432.

¹³ Id., see also Melton J.G. and Baumann M. p.993

¹⁴ Melton J.G. and Baumann M. p.993

What church networks exist today? ¹⁵

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
2,325,000	144,000	64,800	25,500	1,600	-21,200	38,300	157,000

Source: WCD, May 2017

The Tigrinya (mainly Orthodox) is the dominant Christian ethnic group in the country. Evangelical churches are growing but are limited in resources for training and outreach.

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ¹⁶
2,540,000	2,830,000	1,200	-	31,200	-	1,600	77,380

Source: WCD, May 2017

Note on the current situation

- A large number of Eritrean Christians have been subjected to severe regulations imposed by the state. In 2002, Eritrean authorities announced a new registration policy. The policy officially exempted the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church from the registration process. The new law demanded the disclosure of membership and other internal documents. Many institutions chose not to comply with this, since doing so would endanger the safety and security of their members.
- Government fear of radical Islam and Christian evangelicalism has closed down virtually all international NGO projects and aid, and has also restricted the entry of expatriate Christian workers.
- It is estimated that there are many Christians who are still in prison for their faith. Sadly, it is very difficult to tell the exact number, who have died in the prisons due to torture, denial of medical attention and outright negligence by prison authorities.

¹⁵ **Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelicals:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

¹⁶ This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 86 / Position: 6

WWL 2017 Points: 82 / Position: 10

WWL 2016 Points: 89 / Position: 3

Where persecution comes from

Since 1993 the country's regime under the leadership of President Afewerki has become synonymous with absolute authoritarianism and is doing everything to maintain its power. It has arrested, harassed and killed Christians because they are considered to be agents of the West and hence a threat to the state and the government. Secondly, approximately half of the Eritrean population is Muslim. Since Muslims mostly reside in the lowlands along the Red Sea Coast and the border with Sudan, Eritrean Muslims are showing a tendency towards radicalism partly due to the increase in Islamic militancy in the region. This means that Christians living in those areas are particularly vulnerable, especially converts from Islam. Eritrean Muslims are "Muslims first" and "Eritrean second". Conversion to Christianity is seen as a betrayal of community, family and Islamic faith. Thirdly, the Eritrean Orthodox Church (EOC) has a long historical presence in the country and sometimes puts pressure on Christians with a different background (see below).

How Christians are suffering

In Eritrea, all Christian communities are affected by persecution even though the intensity and sources of persecution may vary. Arrests and forced disappearance are very common in the country. Christians are being forced to join the armed forces, and especially Protestants face serious problems in accessing community resources, especially social services provided by the state.

Christians from non-traditional church groups face the harshest persecution both from the government and from the EOC. Both converts from a Muslim background and cross-denominational converts from an Orthodox background face harsh mistreatment from their families and communities.

Government security forces conducted many house-to-house raids and arrested hundreds of Christians. House churches and Christian materials were either damaged or confiscated. This extreme pressure and state-sanctioned violence is forcing some Christians to flee the country.

Examples

- The pressure from the EOC partly originates from theological differences but has historical roots as well. Well-organized and with a long tradition the EOC tends to look down upon

other types of Christianity as being newcomers. For the EOC leaders, Eritrea is the home of the Orthodox Church, its Christian history is defined by the Orthodox Church, and other denominations – in particular the Pentecostal churches - are not regarded as legitimate.

- In the WWL 2018 reporting period, a Christian mother died in detention.
- In the WWL 2018 reporting period, government security forces conducted numerous raids on Christians and house-churches and arrested hundreds of Christians. These Christians are being held by the government in miserable conditions, some in shipping containers in scorching temperatures.
- Thousands of Christians have been arrested and imprisoned over the years, some of whom still remain in prison after 11 years. Asmara police stations, Mai Sirwa, Adi Abieto (new for believers to be detained in), Keren (new), Assab, Hashferai, Barentu, Mai Idaga, Alla (new) are some of the detention and prison centers. Many prisoners are forced to work very long hours in commercial flower fields. Some of the notable Christians who have been imprisoned for more than ten years are: Haile Naigzhi, leader of Eritrea’s Full Gospel Church (arrested in 2004); Kiflu Gebremeskel, founder and pastor of Southwest Full Gospel Church (arrested in 2004); Million Gebreselasie, medical doctor and pastor of Massawa Rhema Church (arrested in 2004); Tekleab Menghisteb, medical doctor and priest (arrested in 2004); Gebremedhin Gebregioris, priest (arrested in Nov 2004); Kidane Weldou, pastor of the Full Gospel Church (disappeared in 2005 but believed to be in prison); and Abune Antonios, Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch (under house arrest since 2007).

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 86 / Position: 6

WWL 2017 Points: 82 / Position: 10

WWL 2016 Points: 89 / Position: 3

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Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 86 points, Eritrea reaches rank 6 on WWL 2018, which is a rise of 4 points compared to WWL 2017. This was mainly due to an increase of over 4 points in the score for violent incidents. Government security forces conducted many raids that targeted Christians. Christian materials were taken and some house churches were also damaged in the process. Hundreds of Christians were taken to detention centers. A Christian mother also died in detention. More than ten Christians leaders are still languishing in government prisons under atrocious conditions. It is reported that there are thousands of prisoners of conscience in Eritrean prisons and Christians are among them.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Eritrea ¹⁷	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Weak
Denominational protectionism	Very strong
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	Strong

Denominational protectionism (Very strong):

The Eritrean Orthodox Church has a long historical presence in the country and sometimes puts pressure on Christians with a different background. This pressure partly originates from theological differences but has practical roots as well. Well organized and with a long tradition, the Orthodox Church looks down upon other types of Christianity as being newcomers. For the Orthodox Church leaders, Eritrea is the home of the Orthodox Church, its Christian history is defined by the Orthodox Church, and other denominations – in particular the Pentecostal groups - are not regarded as legitimate. One country researcher says: “There is a serious reservation by Orthodox Christians to accept followers of other forms of Christianity as Christians. And such reservation manifests itself in different forms at different parts of the country. While the reasons for such actions could be mainly [theological differences], the fear of losing the dominant role the Orthodox Church in the way of life of citizens of the country for centuries plays a huge role.”

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

Eritrea became an independent nation following the 1993 referendum. Since 1993, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) has been exercising full control over Eritrea, under the leadership of President Afewerki. The regime has become synonymous with absolute authoritarianism and is doing everything possible to maintain its power: It has arrested, harassed and killed Christians because they are considered to be agents of the West

¹⁷ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

and hence a threat to the state and the government. Sources from inside the country are suggesting that the president is grooming his son to replace him. One country expert says: “After decades of bloody war for independence which is responsible for the loss of tens of thousands of lives and bodily and physiological injury for thousand others, the last thing that was expected of the current ruling party was another oppressive government. However, the current ruling party, in clear disregard of its promises during the armed struggle, formed an absolute authoritarian regime wherein any form of dissent in any form is not tolerated. The number one goal of the ruling party is staying in power at any cost.” It is in this context that the government is persecuting Christians.

Islamic oppression (Strong):

Approximately half of the Eritrean population is Muslim. Since most Muslims reside in the lowlands along the Red Sea Coast and the border with Sudan, Eritrean Muslims are showing a tendency towards radicalism, partly due to what is going on in the region. This means that Christians living in those areas are particularly vulnerable, especially converts from Islam. Eritrean Muslims are “Muslims first” and “Eritrean second”. Conversion to Christianity is seen as a betrayal of community, family and Islamic faith. One country expert states: “This engine is not as strong in the highlands of the country compared to the remote parts of the country where the majority of the population is Muslim. Despite the desire of such extremist groups to form an Islamic state, the fact that the government is not willing to tolerate such form of groups which are considered as a challenge to its power, has played a major role in preventing the spread of their extremist ideas. However, it does not mean that such extremist groups are not a danger to the way of life of Christians especially those living in the lowlands of the country. Christians cannot freely exercise their religion as they wish and getting schools for their kids free from influence of teaching of the above mentioned extremist groups is not easy.”

Organized Corruption and Crime (Strong):

Eritrea is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. According to a report released in January 2017 by Transparency International, Eritrea ranks 164 out of 176 countries.¹⁸ This mainly involves the army which controls so many aspects of life in the country. An expert said: “The military is the strongest amongst all sectors of the government, and abuse of power and corruption are rampant at different levels. One good example in this regard is the bribe that Christians are asked to pay if they got caught while trying to escape the country. Failure to pay such bribes could lead to arbitrary detention or death.”

¹⁸ See https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016, last accessed 7 December 2017.

Drivers of persecution

DRIVERS OF PERSECUTION IN ERITREA	Level of influence
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very strong
Ethnic group leaders	Weak
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very strong
Violent religious groups	Not at all
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Strong
Own (extended) family	Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Very strong
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

One of the main drivers of persecution in Eritrea are government officials. They constantly harass and arrest Christians, especially the ones that are not recognized by the government. The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOC) is another driver that is behind persecution. The EOC is the oldest Christian community in the country and has the most number of Christian followers. It exerts a huge influence in many aspects of life. The problem with such influence is that the church does not welcome new forms of Christianity in the country, above all the Pentecostal churches. And there is no denial that the leaders of the Orthodox Church actively support efforts to limit the expansion of other Christian churches. Muslim religious leaders have also played an important role in creating anti-Christian sentiment among their followers which has in turn resulted in the persecution of Christians. Family members and community leaders are also drivers of persecution, especially when it comes to converts. The ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ) is also another driver that is behind many challenges that Christians in the country face. This is coupled by the existence of networks of corruption within the army and the ruling party that has made life for many Eritreans (especially Christians) very difficult; there is nowhere for them to appeal to for their rights to be respected.

Context

Dubbed the “North Korea of Africa,” Eritrea ranks among the very worst countries in terms of freedom of religion, freedom of press, rule of law and other human rights records. Eritrea entered the World Watch List in 2002, and in 2004 the country jumped into the top 20 and in WWL 2016 ranked 3rd. The Eritrean regime is absolutely authoritarian and intolerant towards any form of unregistered organization, dissent, and free expression. There is no safe place in the country – as is confirmed by the large number of Eritrean refugees in Europe and elsewhere. The fact that those who are oppressed are fleeing the country is an advantage for the government, since some of those fleeing could be among the ones who would otherwise have been pressing the government for changes and reforms. It is also financially advantageous for the government since Eritreans abroad are required to pay an expatriate tax.

According to Reporters Without Borders reporting in April 2016, 11 Eritrean journalists were known to be in prison without trial: “Eritrea systematically violates freedom of expression and information. It is Africa’s biggest prison for journalists.”¹⁹ The president of the country is on the Reporters Without Borders’ list of “Predators of Press Freedom.”²⁰ And the Press Freedom Index ranked the country lowest for the past eight years - even below Somalia, Sudan, China and Iran.

The Eritrean government has made it clear that only officially recognized religions can operate in the country, namely: Sunni Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Roman Catholics and Lutherans. For other Christian denominations it is very difficult to function in the country and as a result they have to face the brunt of the persecution. The introduction of a registration system in 1997 completely outlawed a large category of Christians. Except for the recognized religious institutions named above all other groups were asked to apply for registration. At some point those who applied were labeled as compliant, but no licenses were issued. The government’s attempt to control all religious institutions culminated in the deposing of the Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch in 2007 who has been under house-arrest ever since.

Government abuse and the hardships suffered led to dissatisfaction amongst the population and it eventually resulted in an attempted coup in 2013. It failed and, putting all the blame on the West and Ethiopia, the government now had another excuse to intensify its persecution of Christians, named by the government as “agents of the West”. The incident also gave a chance for Muslims to get closer to the government on the basis of “my enemy is your enemy”.

Eritrea has also been consistently accused of supporting the rise and spread of radical Islamic militants in the Horn of Africa, mainly to gain political advantage. The UN sanctions against Eritrea for this support – for arming al-Shabaab in particular - implies that the Eritrean government is also an accomplice in the persecution of Christians outside Eritrea by supplying the means and methods of persecution to jihadist groups. In addition, the Eritrean government has close ties with the Islamic government of Sudan and is close to countries of the Middle East like Qatar, Iran and Saudi Arabia in terms of culture, policy and geography, where Christians are facing constant opposition. Many Christians are leaving the country via neighboring countries - Sudan, Ethiopia, and Egypt - and have become easy prey for human traffickers, especially in the Sinai desert. Some of them were caught and beheaded in Libya by Islamic State in 2015, but thousands have made it to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea.

Eritrea is one of two African countries re-designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) by the US State Department on 31 October 2016 due to severe violations of freedom of religion.²¹ Robert P. George (Chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom) and Thomas J. Reese (USCIRF Commissioner) suggested that “Eritrea’s track record on human rights crimes and religious freedom warrant a referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague.” A Commission of Inquiry set up by the UN Human Rights

¹⁹ See: <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-appears-african-commission-human-and-peoples-rights>, last accessed 14 September 2017.

²⁰ See: https://gallery.mailchimp.com/5cb8824c726d51483ba41891e/files/Predator_of_press_freedom.02.pdf.

²¹ See: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/irf/c13003.htm>, last accessed 8 December 2016.

Commission also suggested that the Eritrean regime should be referred to the ICC.²² The government suspects that the report by the Commission of Inquiry would not have been possible without cooperation from people inside Eritrea.

In addition to Christians (especially those denominations that are not recognized by the government), other religious minorities also face challenges, for instance Muslims who oppose the government and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Christian communities and how they are affected

All four WWL categories of Christianity are present in Eritrea. The different types of Christians face varying levels and forms of persecution.

Communities of expatriate Christians:

The number of expatriates is significantly declining due to the government's pressure. This group of Christians experience difficulties in traveling in the country and meeting with other Christians.

Historical Christian communities:

This is the biggest group in the country and includes the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics. These Christians live mainly in the Christian-dominated areas of central and southern Eritrea. They are affected by *Islamic oppression* and also face persecution from the government.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

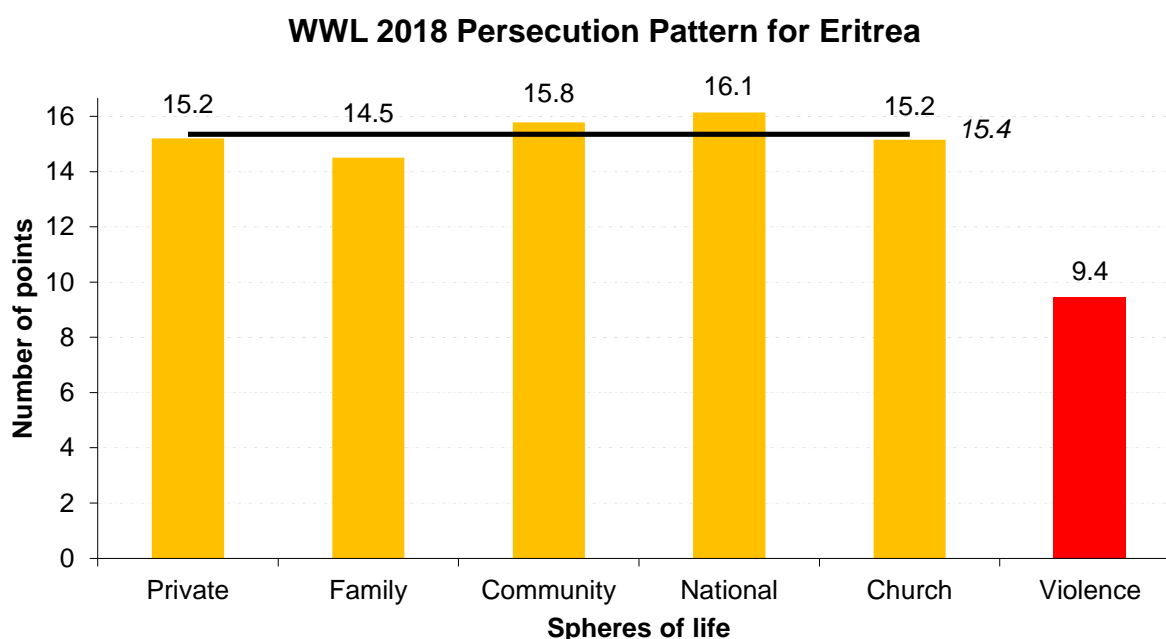
This group refers either to Christians who have left the historical Christian communities (especially the Orthodox Church) to join non-traditional congregations or to Muslims who have converted to Christianity. The first category can face serious persecution from the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the latter from Muslim families and society.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

This group faces the harshest persecution in the country. Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are seen as agents of the West. The Pentecostal communities in particular face serious persecution especially from government officials and the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

²² See: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20779&LangID=E>, last accessed 8 December 2016.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Eritrea shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Eritrea is 15.4 compared to 15.3 in WWL 2017.
- Pressure is at an extreme level in all *Spheres of life* and strongest in the *National sphere* (16.1), which is an indication that government policy is mainly responsible for the persecution of Christian in the country.
- The score for violence rose from 5.0 in WWL 2017 to 9.4. This sharp rise of over 4 points is due to the increase in house raids by government security forces which resulted in the confiscation of Christians materials and sometimes damage to house-churches. Over the last years, thousands of Christians have been arrested and imprisoned and many have died as prisoners. There are still many Christians languishing in prisons because of their faith. In the WWL 2018 reporting period, one Christian mother died in detention.

Private life:

The government continuously targets individuals in their private life, making their everyday lives complicated. Many Christian homes were targeted for raids in the WWL 2018 reporting period which resulted in arrests and the confiscation of Christian materials. The restriction on freedom of religion against Christians in Eritrea goes to the extent of officials conducting house-to-house searches against anyone suspected of being a member of the so-called new forms of Christianity. The controlling nature of the ruling party seeks to monitor the daily activities of members of the minority Christian groups. Cadres and security forces of the ruling party can search any private residence without the need to get a court warrant. Underground Christians at prayer are the main targets. Private possession of basic materials for a Christian life (e.g. the Bible, Bible dictionary, books by Christian scholars, CDs of Christian sermons, T-

shirts with biblical quotes) are considered treason by the ruling party and will lead to arbitrary detention for an indefinite period without the need to get any court decision to that effect.

Family life:

For Christians, family life is under threat in Eritrea. Due to government arrests, imprisonment, and abductions, Christian families disintegrate. Some family members are forced to flee their country often leaving vulnerable family members at home. Due to *Denominational protectionism*, some Christians are also denied inheritance as well as other family-related rights. Due to *Islamic oppression*, Christians face multifaceted challenges in Muslim dominated areas. For example: Christians with a Muslim background cannot conduct a Christian wedding in public, and when they die, they are buried according to Muslim rites. When planning a wedding, the problems for followers of the so-called “new religion” start when a hall needs to be found for conducting the ceremony. Most halls are controlled by the government. Unless the wedding planners hide the fact that the wedding is for Protestants, no one will be willing to rent a hall to them for fear of repercussions from government officials. This is of course in addition to the fact that most owners of private halls are anyway unwilling to rent their hall to Protestants. Another problem is then to find a pastor willing to conduct the wedding. There have been instances where wedding couples, pastors and guests have all been detained for participating in a wedding. Non-Orthodox church leaders are risking their personal freedom whenever they conduct weddings for Christian couples. Even after getting married, the law of the land will not give legal recognition to such marriages since it is claimed that unregistered churches have no authority to hold weddings.

Community life:

The government is known to enlist the help of the community to spy on all Christian activities in their locality. This can give rise to strange alliances: e.g. Muslims monitoring Evangelical activities on behalf of the government - especially any outreach to Muslims in their communities. To operate businesses, Christians are required to produce a certificate of military service. Christians cannot get access to higher education if they are not enlisted to serve in the army. Because of the communal way of life practiced in this part of the world, it is unthinkable for the day-to-day life of a Christian not to be affected because of his religious beliefs. Fearing that they will persuade their children to become Christians too, the majority of Eritrean families will not allow their children to play with the children of converts. Such marginalization goes even to the extent of family to family relationships. The level of threat and obstruction is higher in rural areas where the level of tolerance and acceptance is very low compared to the urban areas. In most cases, converts in rural areas will not disclose their religious beliefs for fear of discrimination. It should be noted here that in some instances the level of threat against converts goes to the extent of forcing the converts to either renounce their new faith or leave the community once and for all. There have also been instances where converts have been denied access to basic needs like health care, drinking water, schools for their children because of their new faith.

National life:

Eritrea is referred to as “The North Korea of Africa” and designated a “Country of Particular Concern” by the US State Department because the country has a policy that severely restricts

freedom of religion. That is why the national sphere score is the highest. The country has made it clear that only recognized religious groups can exist and operate in the country. It is the government that appoints the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and, as happened in 2007, any dissent by a religious leader can lead to removal from post and arrest. The government is known to force Christians to act against their conscience. Pursuant to Article 6 of Proclamation on National Service No. 82/1995 of 1995, any Eritrean citizen between the age of 18 and 50 has the obligation to enlist for national service. The Proclamation does not provide any exception for citizens not wanting to enlist on religious grounds. Religious groups have thus faced enormous pressure and violence for refusing to take part in or for quitting national service.

The pressure mentioned above goes hand in hand with the refusal by the state to recognize religious groups other than the four registered by the state²³. Such denial of recognition by the state is taken as a legal ground for local community leaders and local police to harass and intimidate Christians belonging to non-registered fellowships. It is very common for ruling party cadres and local police to arrest and interrogate anyone suspected of being a follower of an unregistered religious group. If the individual being interrogated is found to be a member of an unregistered religious group, he or she will in most cases be sent to one of the concentration camps located in remote corners of the country. After release from such unjust detention, the individual will be ordered to denounce his religion and also report to the local police on a weekly or monthly basis. Failure to report will lead to further detention.

Church life:

Religious groups in Eritrea must by law either register or cease operating. However, getting a registration permit is virtually impossible. Raids on underground Christian meetings are common and the government has a strong intelligence machinery. Christians from churches not recognized by the government have to constantly make sure they are not being followed. Never in the history of Eritrea since independence have members of non-traditional Christian communities been able to freely conduct prayers without the risk of getting arrested, arbitrarily detained or even killed. The government also interferes in the election of religious leaders. For example, the Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch, Patriarch Abune Antonios, has been under house arrest since May 2007. Furthermore, religious groups cannot print and distribute documents/materials without prior approval by the Office of Religious Affairs. Since 2002 the state authorities have not approved any registrations beyond the country's four principal religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church of Eritrea, the Roman Catholic Church and Islam.

Violence:

More than 300 Christians have been arrested in the WWL 2018 reporting period. These Christians are being held by the government in miserable conditions, some in shipping containers in scorching temperatures. Thousands of Christians have been arrested and imprisoned over the years, some of whom still remain in prison after 11 years. The location of

²³ It has to be noted that Compliance status was given to those groups that applied for registration – leading to some benefits initially at least in 1997 when the government ordered them to register. That benefit withered away as time went by.

some of the detention and prison centers are Asmara police stations, Mai Sirwa, Adi Abieto, Assab, Hashferai, Barentu, Mai Idaga, and Alla. Many prisoners are forced to work very long hours in commercial flower fields. Some of the notable Christians who have been imprisoned for more than ten years are: Haile Naigzhi, leader of Eritrea's Full Gospel Church (arrested in 2004); Kiflu Gebremeskel, founder and pastor of Southwest Full Gospel Church (arrested in 2004); Million Gebreselasie, medical doctor and pastor of Massawa Rhema Church (arrested in 2004); Tekleab Menghisteb, medical doctor and priest (arrested in 2004); Gebremedhin Gebregiorsis, priest (arrested in Nov 2004), Kidane Weldou pastor of the Full Gospel Church (disappeared in 2005 but believed to be in prison), and Abune Antonios Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch (under house arrest since 2007). A mother of three also died in detention in the WWL 2018 reporting period.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

Female Christians face enormous challenges. Cross-denominational converts from the EOC as well as Christians from a Muslim background face forced marriage and forced renunciation of their new faith. Women are also subjected to obligatory military training and national service; however, men are more impacted by this.

Male:

Male Christians in the country are mainly victims of the system of obligatory military conscription. As a result, many young Eritreans seek to escape the country.²⁴

Future outlook

Despite protests from international human rights groups and the UN Human Rights Commission's report on crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Eritrean government, the regime has not yet faced serious consequences for its appalling human rights record. In fact the country is trying to work out ways of reestablishing a strong relationship with Western countries. Considering past trends, the following scenario seems likely:

- Oppressed and persecuted Eritreans will continue to flee the country.
- The Eritrean government will continue its authoritarian course and regard non-traditional Christian communities as agents of the West.
- The Eritrean government will continue forcing all Eritreans to join the national army and do national service for extended periods of time without upholding the rights of conscientious objectors.
- The Eritrean Orthodox Church and radical Muslims will continue persecuting converts.
- It is unlikely that those who are in prison because of their faith will be released without them signing statements contrary to their beliefs.

²⁴ See <https://www.economist.com/blogs/baobab/2014/03/national-service-eritrea> last accessed 25 September 2017.

Policy considerations

The Eritrean government has isolated itself and the people from the international community in many ways. The many condemnations have not yet brought any meaningful results. Yet it is important to continue doing so:

- The US State Department should continue designating the country as CPC.
- THE USCIRF should continue recommending the designation of the country as CPC.
- The government of Eritrea must be pressed to stop arresting, harassing and intimidating Christians.
- The government of Eritrea must be pressed to release all Christians in jail.
- The government of Eritrea should be urged to allow international observers and investigators to enter the country.

WWR in-depth reports

There are currently no in-depth reports on Eritrea available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Eritrea available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/eritrea/>

- Eritrea: Newlyweds among 32 Christians arrested in fresh crackdown
28 March 2018
Eritrean police have arrested 32 Christians in the capital, Asmara, this month, including a newlywed couple and ten of their guests. Twenty were arrested on Sunday 25 March, all of whom remain in detention.
- UN 'failing' Eritrea's detained Christians
16 March 2018
Eritrea's human rights record was again in the spotlight at the UN Human Rights Council earlier this week. Kate Gilmore, Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in her opening remarks that over 100 people were arrested in Eritrea in 2017 on religious grounds.

- [Eritrea: mental health challenges for Christian man freed after 13 years in prison](#)
16 January 2018
Shiden* was young and full of optimism for the future when he was imprisoned for his Christian faith. For the next 13 years he was exposed to torture of different kinds.
- [Eritrean Christians told to remove crosses as schools forced to go public](#)
3 November 2017
Eritrea's security forces shot at protesters, using live ammunition, in the capital Asmara on Tuesday 31 October 2017 during a protest against the government's plans to turn all schools public.
- [Eritrean Christian mother's 'isolation' after church-leader husband imprisoned](#)
15 September 2017
The year after her church was officially closed, Ruth married her husband, already a church leader. They had three children, but then the government imprisoned him.
- [Eritrean Patriarch's first appearance in decade dismissed as 'fig leaf'](#)
21 July 2017
A brief public appearance from the Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch after ten years under house arrest has been dismissed as a "fig leaf" to cover over the regime's "appalling human rights record". Patriarch Abune Antonios participated in a Mass at St Mary's Cathedral in the capital, Asmara, on Sunday 16 July 2017.
- [Eritrea arrests another 22 Christians](#)
16 June 2017
The number of Eritrean Christians arrested since the beginning of May has risen to more than 120, according to charities Open Doors and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW).
- [100 Christians detained, 10 years after Eritrea put Patriarch under house arrest](#)
26 May 2017
The Eritrean government has stepped up its campaign against Christians, arresting almost 100 in the past month.

Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Eritrea> (password: freedom).

- Eritrea: Christian mother dies in prison

4 September 2017

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reporting on 11 August 2017, a Christian mother who was arrested in May 2017 with her husband has died while in detention.

- Eritrea: Amnesty International's new report lambasts Eritrean government

19 February 2017

In its submission to the UN Human Rights Committee published on 30 January 2017, Amnesty International has lambasted the Eritrean government for not implementing international human rights standards.

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