Home Office
BUILDING A SAFE, JUST AND TOLERANT SOCIETY

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN INFORMATION BULLETIN

ERITREA

'Evangelicals': Unregistered Christian Churches

JULY 2006

Eritrea 02/2006

RDS-IND
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN INFORMATION SERVICE

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This Country of Origin Information Bulletin contains the most up-to-date publicly available information as at 1 June 2006. Older source material has been included where it contains relevant information not available in more recent documents.

1 Introduction

1.01 This Country of Origin Information Bulletin (COI Bulletin) provides a brief overview of the treatment of people belonging or suspected of belonging to protestant unregistered churches (known as 'Evangelicals' occasionally 'Pentes') in Eritrea. It should be read in conjunction with the Eritrea Country of Origin Information Report (COI Report).

1.02 This COI Bulletin has been prepared by the Country of Origin information Service of Research Development and Statistics (RDS), Home Office, for use by those involved in the asylum / human rights determination process. It has been compiled from information obtained from a variety of recognised external sources and does not contain any Home Office opinion or policy. The Bulletin is not exhaustive: it concentrates on reports considered to be relevant to those involved in the asylum/human rights determination process, and on Eritrean Evangelicals, as raised within the United Kingdom asylum system.

1.03 The COI Bulletin is sourced throughout. It is intended to be a signpost to the source material, which has been made available to decision makers. The majority of the source material is readily available in the public domain. Where sources identified in the Bulletin are available in electronic form the relevant link has been included, together with the date that it was accessed. Paper copies of the sources have been distributed to nominated officers in Asylum Caseworking Directorate and Presenting Officer Units.

1.04 This COI Bulletin and the accompanying source material are publically disclosable.

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2 Overview

2.01 The religious demography of Eritrea is of an approximate half-and-half split between Christian groups living mainly in the highland areas, and Muslim groups living around the coast. (Europa, USSD) The Christian population is predominantly of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. (USSD) The Eritrean Orthodox Church is not a state church, but is an institution that the Government accords much respect (though reform movements within the church such as Medhane Alem are viewed with suspicion). (USIRF) There are two other main Christian groups – the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church (Lutheran) – that are accepted by the Government. (Europa, USSD, USIRF) Besides the accepted Christian denominations are other Christian groupings (as well as minority non-Christian groupings) that are not accepted, and not tolerated, by the Government (USSD, USIRF); and this Bulletin concentrates on those unaccepted Christian groups.

2.02 Amnesty International's summary in the December 2005 report adds numerical detail:

"Eritrea has a highly religious population, with some 98% of its 3.7 million people belonging to a long - established branch of a major world religion. Most Eritreans actively practice their faith... Of the other Christian denominations [than the Orthodox Church] … about 2% are Protestants, of whom about half belong to a Lutheran church, and about half to smaller religious movements, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and at least 36 evangelical and Pentecostal churches … All religions in Eritrea are nationally organized faiths. Some are affiliated to national bodies". **[2a](p3)**

2.03 The contents of this Bulletin in summary:

- The Eritrean Government has regulated religious groups through a registration scheme since 2002 (Section 3 – Registration Scheme).
- The Government has arrested members of unregistered groups since 2002 (Section 3 – Arrests).
- Groups of unregistered organisations that have been targeted by the Government since 2002 include Jehovah's Witnesses (Section 4 – Banned religious groupings other than Evangelicals) but especially evangelical, Pentecostal, and charismatic Protestant Christian churches known as 'Evangelicals' (occasionally 'Pentes') (Section 5 – General information).

2.04 Though a number of reports (UNHCR) **[14a]** use the term 'Pentes', some reports, such as the Human Rights Without Frontiers report that collates 2003 postings (HRWF 2003) **[7a]** and the Amnesty International report "Eritrea religious persecution" published 7 December 2005 (AI December 2005 report) **[2a]** consider the term "Pentes" pejorative. The collective term 'Evangelicals' is used by most other reports, such as the postings of Release-Eritrea (Release-Eritrea) **[8a-f]** and in the plural, not adjectivally, to distinguish the term from 'churches that are (generally) evangelical'.

2.05 There are few sources outlining information about the Evangelicals churches beyond accounts of arrests and other incidents. However specific churches are named in accounts (Section 5 – Known groups); some general estimates given of numbers (Section 5 – General information); and a little information exists regarding belief and practice (Section 5 – Known groups).

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3 Government Action

REGISTRATION SCHEME

3.01 The UNHCR position paper of January 2004 (confirmed by UNHCR in August 2005 to still be their position, and repeated by AI in the December 2005 report) summarises the ban and initial period of the government action, citing the USSD for 2002 and AI reports for 2003:-

"In May 2002, the government reportedly ordered several minority churches, referred collectively as the 'Pentes' (including Born Again Christians, Pentecostals, Full Gospel and other small protestant groups) to close down. They were required to register with the new Department of Religious Affairs and receive authorization to reopen. Although the churches reportedly complied with the registration requirements, which included providing extensive details of members and funds, and were informally allowed to continue to worship, none of them were known to have been officially registered by 19 September 2003." **[14a](p.5)**

3.02 The Proclamation on Religious Organisations no. 73/1995 is the primary piece of legislation for the registration (AI December 2005) **[2a](p4)**. The information required under registration is listed in an annex to a Release-Eritrea posting, dated 25 June 2005. **[8b](p5-7)** A registration exercise was originally planned in 1995, with the four main faith groups (Orthodox, Lutheran, Catholic and Muslim) registered quickly, but other groups' registration postponed until May 2002 (AI December 2005) **[2a](p8).** The Government had, meantime, in 1997, approved a Constitution which provides the freedom to practice any religion, though in practice, this provision has yet to be implemented (United States International Religious Freedom report for 2005 - USIRF report for 2005) **[1b](p2).** In May 2002, all unregistered religious groups were required to cease operation until they had been granted registration by the Government (USIRF report for 2005) **[1b](p2);** (AI December 2005) **[2a](p8).** This edict affected 12 unregistered Christian churches at the time. The four recognised religious groups were not required to register (USIRF report for 2005). **[1b](p2)**

3.03 Four unregistered churches have since completed registration formalities but, as of December 2005, were not accepted as registered by the Government. The United States State Department report on human rights practices in countries, Eritrea, for 2005, published 8 March 2006 (USSD report for 2005) states:

"The Government approved no registrations during the period covered by this report, despite the fact that four religious groups fully complied with registration requirements over 3 years ago and continued to inquire with the concerned government offices. Several religious groups have complied partially with the registration requirements, and some have chosen not to submit any documentation. The country's representative at the UN's Commission on Human Rights state[d] on April 5 [5 April 2005] that the Seventh-day Adventist Church's registration application would be 'finalized in the near future.' The Church's application had not been approved by the end of the period covered by this report."

"… Authorities generally have not hindered the four groups that filled out their registration applications in 2002 – the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Faith Mission Church, and the Baha'I Faith – in holding home prayer or private study meetings, although like other unregistered groups their houses of worship remain closed, and they are not permitted to meet in public settings." **[1b](p2)**

3.04 The USIRF report for 2005 states: "The Government closely monitors the activities and movements of unregistered religious groups and members, including nonreligious social functions attended by members." **[1b](p2)** "Some persons reportedly cooperated with

government authorities by reporting on and harassing members of those groups." **[1b](p5)**

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ARRESTS

3.05 The members of unregistered churches are subject to arrest periodically and on occasion by the authorities as a consequence of not being registered. Details of arrests are documented in the AI December 2005 report **[2a]**; in the HRWF for 2003 reports **[7a]**; and in the Release-Eritrea report of 25 June 2005 **[8e]**. The AI report December 2005 highlights:

"… 44 incidents of religious persecution which have been documented over the past three years [2003 – 2005] and are mainly the consequence of the government's ban in 2002 on the minority religious groups… The sources for information for these arrests, numbering over 1,750 men, women and children altogether during this period, include international religious organizations monitoring the arrests and Eritrean diaspora faith groups, as well as Amnesty International's own sources. Undoubtedly there have been many more cases not reported." **[2a](p9-10)**

3.06 Since the AI December 2005 report, the following arrests, detentions and incidents have been reported. Release International, in an undated webpage but which refers to September 2005, states detentions as "up to 1800 Christians" **[10a](p1)**; the USIRF report for 2005 states: "Government restrictions make it difficult to determine the precise number of religious prisoners, but the number of long-term prisoners continues." **[1b](p3)**

3.07 The USIRF report for 2005 summarises the detentions and arrests:

"During the reporting period [2005], there were reliable reports that authorities detained at least 500 members of unregistered religious groups without charges. Many were released after detentions of several days or less, but some spent longer periods in confinement without charges and without access to legal counsel." **[1b](p3)**

3.08 Recent reports of arrests have included an AI Urgent Action regarding "40 pastors, elders, and leading laymen from five of Eritrea's banned Protestant churches" in late December 2005 (Voice of the Martyrs) **[3a]**; 75 Evangelicals detained on 1 February 2006 (Amnesty International) **[2d]**; and on 23 May 2006, 54 college students were arrested (Release-Eritrea). **[8d]**

3.09 The USIRF report for 2006 adds:

"Government violations of religious freedom are alleged to be particularly severe in the armed forces. During the war with Ethiopia, many Eritrean soldiers accepted various forms of Protestantism, reportedly alarming government officials and leading to the banning of prayer meetings among armed forces members. Attendance at such meetings is punishable by imprisonment. Moreover, armed forces members and national service inductees reportedly face severe punishment for possession of religious literature, including Bibles." **[5b](p95)**

3.10 People detained as religious prisoners of conscience are reported to be subject to the same or similar abuses as other prisoners. The AI report December 2005 gives an account in Section 8 "Torture and ill-treatment of religious prisoners of conscience". **[2a](p17-18)** The USSD report for 2005 summarises known practices:

"There were reliable reports that torture was widespread in an unknown number of detention facilities. In addition to psychological abuse, escapees reported the use of physical torture at a few prisons. Authorities suspended prisoners from trees with their arms tied behind their backs, a technique known as 'almaz' (diamond). Authorities also

placed prisoners face down with their hands tied to their feet, a torture technique known as the 'helicopter.'" **[1a](p2)**

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4 Other Religious Groupings

BANNED RELIGIOUS GROUPINGS OTHER THAN EVANGELICALS

4.01 The United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2005 reported that:

"The Government's already poor record on freedom for minority religious groups continued to worsen during the period covered by this report. The Government harassed, arrested, and detained members of Pentecostal and other independent evangelical groups... There were also numerous reports of attempts to force recantations". **[1b](p1)**

4.02 The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reported in 2005 that:

"The government of Eritrea engages in particularly severe violations of freedom of religion or belief. It has banned public religious activities by all religious groups that are not officially recognized, closed their places of worship, inordinately delayed action on registration applications by religious groups, arrested participants at prayer meetings and other gatherings, detained members of unregistered churches and other religious activists indefinitely and without charge, mistreated or even tortured some religious detainees, and severely punished armed forces members and national service inductees for possession of religious literature, including Bibles... Although there is no state religion, the government has close ties to the Orthodox Church and is suspicious of newer groups – in particular, Protestant Evangelical, Pentecostal, and other Christian denominations not traditional to Eritrea". **[5a]**

"… Relations among the four government - recognized religious communities are generally good. In recent years, however, Protestant Evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal churches have faced societal and government pressure. The Orthodox Church has publicly expressed concern about the growth of denominations it views as heretical, and the loss, particularly of its younger members, to them. The government has restricted foreign faith - based humanitarian organizations, apparently fearing the destabilizing effect of proselytism by outside groups, both Christian and Muslim. Government spokespersons have cited Pentecostals, along with extremist Islamist groups, as threats to national security". **[5a]**

4.03 The BBC reported on 20 April 2006 that the campaign group Christian Solidarity Worldwide had stated that 'permitted' churches were facing repression from the Eritrean Government. **[13a]** The statement crystallises the finding of various reports from 2004 and 2005 which have noted that Medhane Alem, a group inside the Orthodox church has been targeted by the Government. The USSD report for 2005 summarises:

"In February [2005] the government shut down and arrested the organizers of a Sunday school organized by an Orthodox church group known as Medhane Alem, a group whose religious services the government did not approve. At year's end [2005] the three organizers remained in jail. The three ministers led the Medhane Alem group and who were arrested in October 2004 remained imprisoned without charge at year's end [2005][sic – repetition]" **[1a](p6)**

4.04 The AI report December 2005 adds "The Medhane Alem ('Saviour of the World') movement, a bible study group of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, centred around the Medhane Alem church in Asmara." **[2a](p5)** The Release-Eritrea report dated 26 June 2005 added more detail about Medhane Alem:

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"In December 2004 reports began to circulate indicating that three Orthodox priests had been detained during the third week of November 2004. Rev. Dr Futsum Gebrenegus, Eritrea's only psychiatrist, Rev. Dr Tekleab Menghisteab, a highly respected physician, and Rev. Gebremedhin Gebregiorgis, an expert theologian, are all reported to have been involved in the renewal movement within the Orthodox Church, which was recently criticized by President Afwerki during his Independence Day speech on May 24. 2005. According to local sources, the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church objected to these arrests and accused the government of 'interfering' in church affairs. Following this intervention, for the first time ever the traditional Christmas message by the Patriarch was not aired on national media." **[8e]**

4.05 The Herald Express, a UK local paper, reported on 28 April 2006 that a local Torquay pastor had been expelled from Eritrea after arriving in Asmara with bibles for the Eritrean Orthodox Church, a recognised church **[11a]**; (also BBC report of 20 April 2006). **[13a]**

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5 'Evangelicals' Churches

GENERAL INFORMATION

5.01 The term 'Pentes' originates in Ethiopia, and is held to be a pejorative term originating from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's distrust of pentecostal churches and their practices (African Christianity) **[12a](p2)**, and in African Christianity's account, "… a testimony to the influence of the Pentecostal movement on Ethiopian protestantism…" **[12a](p2)** There is information on the practices of Pentes groups in Ethiopia on the webpage of Jörg Haustein, a theologian specialising in the Pentecostal churches, based at the University of Heidelberg. **[9a]** African Christianity website continues that in Ethiopia:

"The Mulu Wengel (Full Gospel) church grew out of the Heavenly Sunshine Bible study, begun by a group of high school students learning English and a Mennonite doctor, though it was also decisively influenced by the teachings of the Finnish Pentecostal Mission, and has never had formal connections with any western mission. Meserete Kristos [another church] followed Mulu Wengel's lead in cultivating the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit... Both Meserete Kristos and Mulu Wengel churches practice faith healing, exorcism of demons, and glossolalia". **[12a](p2)**

5.02 There is no information that these practices are practiced in the churches of the same names in Eritrea. However, information from the AI December 2005 report shows similar societal prejudices against evangelical churches:

"Since then [May 2002], there has been a rapid growth of evangelical churches in Eritrea. This has often been a source of tension between them and the three main Christian churches, which were losing members to them. They had different doctrines, forms of worship and weddings, and 'fellowship' for prayer and study. They often proselytized (sought converts) or expressed their faith in new, 'charismatic' ways in public places, which attracted some disapproval from members of the main religious groups - Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran and Islam." **[2a](p8)**

5.03 With regards to the number of unregistered Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Eritrea, Human Rights Without Frontiers stated in a 26 November 2003 report that there were 12 independent churches so regarded by the Government in 2002 **[7a](p2)**; by 2005, "at least 36 evangelical and Pentecostal churches" is the AI December 2005 estimate. **[2a](p1)**

5.04 Release-Eritrea notes in a 17 December 2004 posting that:

"Some of these churches [all evangelical and Pentecostal required by the Government to re-register their churches in May 2002] are historically linked with the worldwide Protestant denominations, such as the Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Baptists, Mennonites, Methodists. Others are indigenous churches, which are not linked to international Protestant denominations, including the Rhema church, the Hallelujah church, the New Covenant church, the Philadelphia church, etc." **[8b]**

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KNOWN GROUPS

5.05 **Church of the Living God**
Members have been named in arrest reports: Semere Zaid, an agriculture lecturer at the University of Asmara (AI December 2005 report) **[2a](p12)**; and 'Pastor Simon' – "Originally from one of the Medhane Alem revival groups within the [Eritrean] Orthodox Church, Pastor Simon is a minister in the Church of the Living God" (Voice of the Martyrs) **[3a]** Pastor Simon was arrested on 26 December 2005, but later reported as

having escaped from detention and was in hiding, as of 6 January 2006 (Voice of the Martyrs). **[3a]**

5.06 **Dubre Bethel Church**
No information other than the church was located in Asmara in September 2003, when members were arrested, and then released unharmed after several days' detention. (AI Report December 2005) **[2a](p10)**

5.07 **Faith of Christ Church**
Arrest reports noted that members of the Faith of Christ Church were arrested in Adi-Kehey in December 2003 (AI Report December 2005). **[2a](p10)**

5.08 **Hallelujah Church / Hallelujah Pentecostal Church**
Arrests reported include a March 2004 report of Pastor Teweldemedhin and 55 members of the church arrested in Asmara on 12 February 2004 (Amnesty International) **[2b]**. In September 2005 after the Hallelujah and Philadelphia churches arranged a wedding party in Asmara, 20 people were arrested and detained for one month. (USSD for 2005) Pastors are included in arrest lists: Pastor Mengist Teweldemedhin. **[1a](p6)**

5.09 **Kale Hiwot** (Word of Life)
The USIRF report for 2005 refers to the church as "the Kale Hiwot (Baptists)" and notes that it has complied with some, but not all, of the Government's registration requirements. **[1b](p2)** The AI report December 2005 adds the church is "a long-established Baptist church affiliated to the SIM, formerly the Sudan Interior Mission." **[2a](p5)** (also, African Christianity) **[12a](p1)**. On 13 October 2005, the Operational headquarters of its development project were closed down by the Government (Release-Eritrea) **[8a]**

Members named – In January 2005, Pastor Ogbamichael Haimanot of the Kale Hiwot church was detained in Asmara along with 115 evangelical church members (AI December 2005 report). **[2a](p12)** Twenty (other) members' whereabouts are still unknown at the end of 2005 after their arrest in March 2004 (USSD for 2005) **[1a](p6)** Amnesty International reported the release of ten members over October and November 2005 in an update dated 29 November 2005. **[2c]**

Pastors mentioned in arrest reports - Pastor Isaac Mehari; Pastor Ogbamichael Haimanot (released January 2005 after becoming mentally ill); Pastor Issa Mekonnen (Release-Eritrea) **[8e]**

5.10 **Mensfesawyan**
The only mention of this church is that it was located in Barentu town in January 2005, and that some of its members were arrested at a wedding on 9 January 2005, along with Mullu Wongel (Full Gospel) church members. (AI December 2005 report) **[2a](p12)**; (Awate website) **[6a]**; (Indian Ocean Newsletter). **[4a]**

5.11 **Meserete Kristos** (Christ is the Foundation)
The USIRF report for 2005 refers to the church as "the Meserete Kristos (Mennonite) church" and notes that it has complied with some, but not all, of the Government's registration requirements. **[1b](p2)** AI report December 2005 adds "affiliated to the worldwide Mennonite Church, established for several decades." **[2a](p5)** A key arrest report was reported by Amnesty International in March 2006, of 200 guests being detained at a Meserete Kristos wedding ceremony on 28 May 2005; most were held for one month's detention, but as many as 70 were detained for longer in Serwa army camp. **[2e](p3)**

5.12 **Mulu Wengel / Mullu Wongel** (Full Gospel)
The main church building complex in Gaza Banda district, Asmara was seized by the Government on 15 October 2003 (HRWF, 3 November 2003). **[7a]** The church is

described by the Release International report as, "Eritrea's largest Pentecostal denomination." **[10a]** African Christianity's account of the church's Ethiopian roots however identifies it as a breakaway Mennonite church that has "… insisted on maintaining its independence from western ties." **[12a](p1)**

Mr. Kidane Gebremeskel; Pastor Abraham Belay; Pastor Fanuel Mihreteab; Pastor Hagos Abraha; Rev. Haile Naizghe; Rev Dr. Kuflu Gebremeskel; Pastor Kidane Weldou; Pastor Tewelde Gebreab are all listed as arrested in June 2005 (Release-Eritrea). **[8e]** Also, Pastor Hagos Toomey (AI report December 2005) **[2a](p12)** Further arrests were made in December 2005 (Voice of the Martyrs), including Pastor Jorjo Gebreab. **[3a]**

5.13 New Covenant Church

Pastor Yohannes Tesfamichael has been listed as having been arrested in June 2005 (Release-Eritrea). **[8e]**

5.14 Philadelphia Church

Philadelphia church members were among those arrested at the September 2005 wedding party incident in Asmara, when 20 people were arrested and detained for one month. (USSD for 2005) **[1a](p6)**

5.15 Rema / Rhema

Pastors of the church, from lists of arrests, include Pastor Habteab Ogbamichael; Pastor Tesfasion Hagos **[8e].** The case of Helen Berhane is widely reported (Amnesty International, Release-Eritrea, USSD for 2005). A gospel singer from the Rema Church, Helen Behane was arrested on 13 May 2004 and is still in detention (AI December 2005 report). **[2a](p11)** The Release-Eritrea posting of 25 June 2005 goes into the detail of Helen Behane's detention. **[8e](p3)**

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Annex A: List of source material

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