



# 2025 SPECIAL REPORT

JUNE 2025

## ERITREA:

### The Life of Jehovah's Witnesses

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MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS AFTER THE  
PRESIDENTIAL DECREE OF 1994



**312**

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES  
IMPRISONED SINCE 1994

**64**

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES  
CURRENTLY IMPRISONED

**7**

NUMBER WHO HAVE DIED  
DUE TO PERSECUTION  
SINCE 1994

# ERITREA

## Summary

The persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea continues unabated. Currently, **64 Jehovah's Witnesses (37 men, 26 women and one 17-year-old girl)** are imprisoned indefinitely without having been charged or tried in a court of law. Among those in custody is an infirm woman who is 86 years old.

Over the past three decades, at least **312 Jehovah's Witnesses** have been imprisoned under harsh conditions most without charge or a release date. At least **seven have died**.

The persecution particularly increased with a presidential decree on October 25, 1994, that revoked their citizenship. The decree has rendered Eritrean Jehovah's Witnesses stateless, preventing them from securing employment, owning property, or accessing basic government issued food items. It also abolished civilian service for

young conscientious objectors, forcing young Witnesses to forgo their education and risk detention. As a result, Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea are unable to live normal lives due all citizens and suffer ill-treatment by neighbors, teachers, officials, and others. Their meetings for worship and public discussion of their religious beliefs are banned. They cannot import religious literature.

The ongoing persecution not only violates human rights but also negatively impacts Eritrean society by imprisoning individuals who could otherwise contribute positively to their communities. Jehovah's Witnesses have repeatedly sought dialogue with the government to address these issues, but their requests have never received a response.

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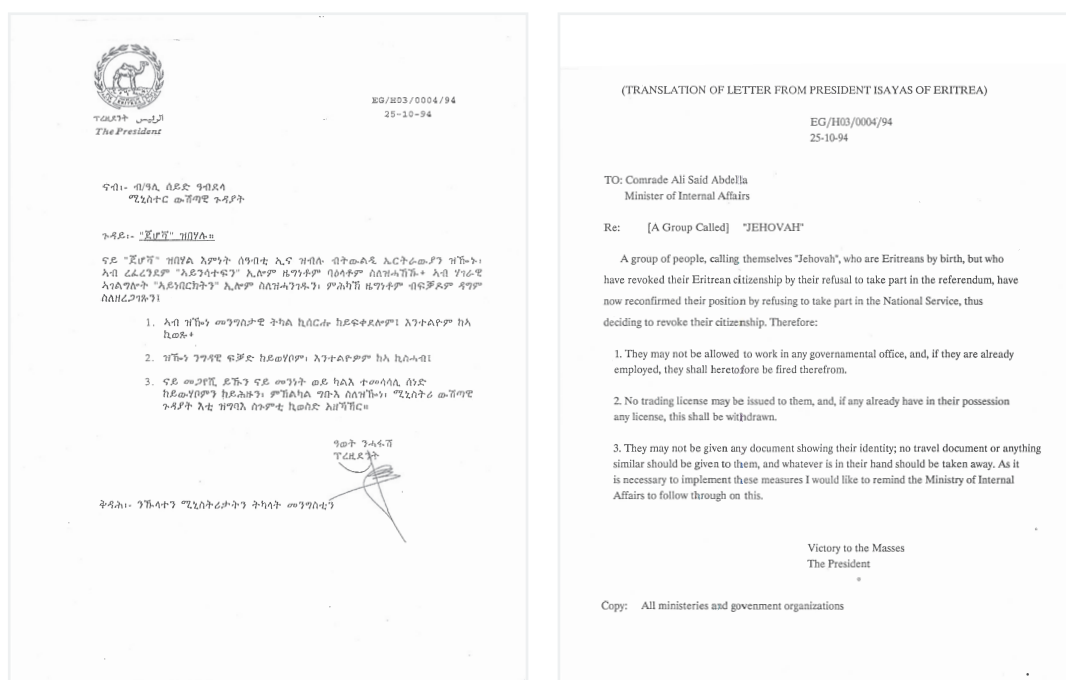
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(37 men, 26 women and a 17-year-old girl)  
are arbitrarily and indefinitely imprisoned.

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## The Life of Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea

Jehovah's Witnesses have a long history in Eritrea, having been active in the country since the 1950s. During the reign of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, as well as during the period of the Derg (Provisional Military Administrative Council), Jehovah's Witnesses did not participate in armed conflict, nor did they take political sides with the respective governments, but consistently remained politically neutral. They have never been a threat to any government.

Their globally-acclaimed political neutrality, based on their personal Bible-trained conscience, did not change when Eritrea became independent and established its own government in the early 1990s. Initially, the conduct of Jehovah's Witnesses was appreciated by the new government, which accorded them some freedom in their religious practice. This changed abruptly following the personal neutral stand that Jehovah's Witnesses took during the referendum on Eritrean independence in 1993, and in response to their conscientious objection to military service. Ignoring their long history of political neutrality in Eritrea, some political leaders misconstrued this as resistance to the new government. However, in no way did Jehovah's Witnesses oppose either the referendum or Eritrean independence. Rather, they merely remained politically neutral. Repeated attempts by Jehovah's Witnesses to contact officials to explain their stand and their desire to cooperate with the government have so far been unsuccessful.



Presidential Decree of 1994 banning Jehovah's Witnesses

Consequently, on October 25, 1994, the president signed a decree stating that all Eritrean-born Jehovah's Witnesses "have revoked their Eritrean citizenship," and had therefore lost their basic civil rights. This meant that they would not be allowed to work in government offices, own businesses, or "be given any document showing their identity; nor travel document or anything similar." To avoid arrest by the ever-present security officers patrolling the streets, most of Jehovah's Witnesses between the ages of 18 and 40 effectively live in hiding. Upon completing 11th grade, and to enroll in 12th grade education, high school students must receive military training and register at the Sawa Military Camp. Because Jehovah's Witnesses conscientiously object to military service, they cannot complete school. When Witnesses are randomly stopped and checked by security officers, they are often arrested, sent to prison camps, and detained indefinitely. Some have spent decades in harsh prison conditions. On November 1, 2024, national security officers came to the Asmara Technical School and arrested four Witness students, ages 16 to 18. They were interrogated and immediately taken to the Mai Serwa Prison. On November 22, the officers took Almaz Gebrehiwot's young daughter from her school to the police station. When Almaz went to the police station to retrieve her daughter, officials released her daughter but detained her instead.

The imprisonment of one or more family members is a major challenge for the whole family. Little or no food is provided in prison, so relatives or friends of prisoners must provide either food or money. Depending on the distance from their home to the prison, this can be an almost unmanageable burden for wives and children, whose income is already severely limited by the restrictions of the presidential decree. Children of Jehovah's Witnesses must grow up without parents, or with only one parent.

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Since 2008, the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses has intensified and includes the elderly, women, and children, all of whom have been arrested and imprisoned. As a result, many of Jehovah's Witnesses have risked their life to flee the country, even though they had no desire to leave home. Those who escape imprisonment must practice their faith in secret and exercise extreme caution in their daily life. Added to this is the lack of prospects and the uncertainty of what the next day will bring. Furthermore, many of Jehovah's Witnesses are exposed to ridicule and hostility from neighbors, classmates, and -people in their community.

### **COMPULSORY PARTICIPATION IN PATRIOTIC CEREMONIES**

For decades, young Jehovah's Witnesses have faced persecution because of respectfully declining to participate in patriotic ceremonies in school. Since January 2023, at least five children of Jehovah's Witnesses have been expelled from school for respectfully declining to sing the national anthem, based on their personal religious conscience. One 16-year-old boy was even imprisoned because of this issue. At least four parents have been arrested and imprisoned by security authorities because of the position taken by their children.

### **DENIAL OF RIGHT TO RELIGIOUS ASSEMBLY**

A number of Jehovah's Witnesses, including children, have been arbitrarily detained by the national security officers for attending peaceful Christian meetings. In April 2014, the police arrested a group of Jehovah's Witnesses at the annual commemoration of Jesus' death, their most sacred event. They were released on bail, and the matter remained pending until March 21, 2016. After pleading guilty, 53 of the Witnesses were fined about USD 20 each for the supposed "illegal assembly." One of the Witnesses, a 30-year-old woman, refused to plead guilty. She was sentenced to a six-month term in the Hazhaz Women's Prison in Asmara and was released on October 5, 2016. This is the only time that one of Jehovah's Witnesses has been formally charged and sentenced. In September 2024, security officials forced their way into a peaceful religious gathering being held in a private home and arrested 24 individuals. Two minors were subsequently released. A few days later, an 85-year-old female Witness was arrested. All 23 Witnesses were then transferred to the Mai Serwa Prison.

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In Resolution A/HRC/29/L.23, para/ 6(j), dated July 2, 2015, the United Nations Human Rights Council called upon the government of Eritrea to “respect everyone’s right to freedom of expression and to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief.”

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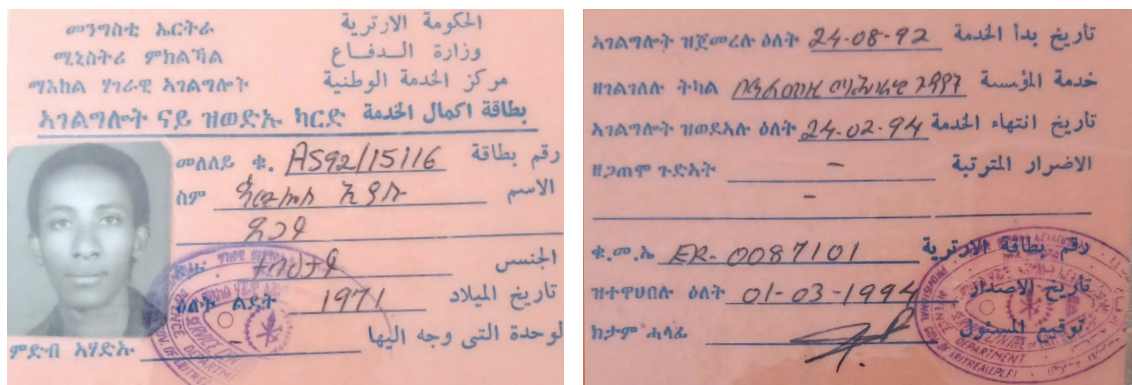
#### **DENIAL OF RIGHT TO CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION TO MILITARY SERVICE**

In Eritrea, there is no provision for alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. The authorities have arrested many Jehovah’s Witnesses for their personal decision not to participate in military activities. On occasion, national security officers have raided the homes of young people whom they want to join the military. When those sought are not at home, the security officers seal the houses, and sometimes even arrest the parents.

The national security officers apprehend both men and women and take them to a military camp. When Jehovah’s Witnesses express their conscientious objection to military service, they face whatever treatment the guards decide to inflict on them, and remain detained indefinitely. Some Witnesses of military age have fled the country to avoid this persecution. If they are caught attempting to leave the country, they face even greater persecution.

Prior to enforcing military conscription in 1994, the Eritrean government provided a civilian service (national service) that did not include military activities, such as road construction and repair. Jehovah’s Witnesses view joining civilian service as a personal conscientious decision for each individual and between 1992 and 1994, many of the Witnesses performed this national service. Upon completion, the authorities issued a “Certificate of Completed National Service.”

It is well-documented that thousands of Jehovah's Witnesses around the world have performed genuine alternative civilian service of a nonpunitive nature. Government officials have praised the Witnesses for their excellent cooperation, and for making a meaningful contribution to their community. Kou-Enn Lin, director general of the National Conscription Agency of Taiwan, publicly stated: "Alternative service benefits the country and the community in many ways. . . . Religious people often have a good spirit in serving their community. . . . I find that they [Jehovah's Witnesses] serve with much enthusiasm because this activity is really in line with their own religious beliefs."



Certificate of completed national service

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— KOU-ENN LIN, DIRECTOR GENERAL  
OF THE NATIONAL CONSCRIPTION  
AGENCY OF TAIWAN



## Status of Jehovah's Witnesses "Imprisoned for Their Faith"

Most of the detained Jehovah's Witnesses are being held at the Mai Serwa and Adi Abeto prisons on the outskirts of Asmara. At the time of writing, 64 Witnesses are in custody, at least 21 of whom are believed to have been jailed for conscientious objection to military service. (See insert for additional details. The most recent list can be found on jw.org at <https://www.jw.org/en/news/region/eritrea/jehovahs-witnesses-in-prison/>.)

The police or national security officers have apprehended some who were peacefully worshipping privately or expressing their beliefs. Others are incarcerated for undisclosed reasons. None of those arbitrarily imprisoned have ever been formally charged or had the opportunity to defend themselves in court. They do not know when, if ever, they will be released and are effectively in unpaid slave labor. This is in blatant violation of Article 8 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Eritrea acceded on January 22, 2002. Conditions in the Mai Serwa and Adi Abeto prisons are extremely harsh. Prisoners are so tightly crowded into small cells where there is not enough space to lie flat and they must sleep on their side squeezed against each other. Sanitation facilities are nonexistent. Men and women alike are allowed to relieve themselves only at fixed times—twice a day— while being watched by the soldiers. There is inadequate medical care, and an inadequate supply of food and water. Visitors are not permitted.



### Letebrhan Tesfay

**Born:** 1939

**Biography:** Letebrhan is an 85-year-old woman who is known for her resilience and dedication to her faith. She was born in Asmara

in the neighborhood called Senita. She was one of the first Eritreans to study the Bible and became one of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1957. She married Zerisenay Derar in 1971. Despite losing their home and work in 1994 after the issuance of the presidential decree, Letebrhan and her husband remained dedicated to their faith. Her husband passed away in 2006.

She is the mother of nine children, eight of whom are Jehovah's Witnesses, along with nine grandchildren. Her daughter, Hadassa Zerisenay, is imprisoned with her in Mai Serwa.

**Case History:** Letebrhan has been detained twice for her religious activities. Her first detention occurred in the 1970s under Emperor Haile Selassie. More recently, she was detained on September 30, 2024, for holding a peaceful meeting for worship in her home.



## Wintana Shewaseged

**Born:** December 21, 1985

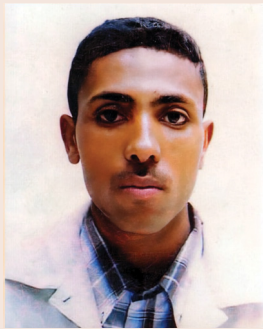
**Biography:**

Wintana is a 36 year old woman who comes from a single-parent family. Her father is deceased, and her mother left the country due to religious persecution. Before her imprisonment, Wintana worked in the family business, where she designed, sewed and sold clothes. She also studied accounting. Her creativity and generosity are well-known, as she often

made gifts for others and enjoyed various handicrafts, including painting. Wintana was baptized as one of Jehovah's Witnesses on August 5, 2007.

**Case History:** Wintana was arrested and imprisoned on April 27, 2014, while attending a religious meeting. She has remained in prison ever since, enduring significant hardships because of her religious beliefs.

Despite the challenges she faces, she remains hopeful and strong. Her love for the Bible has been a cornerstone of her life, providing her with the strength to endure her imprisonment.



## Henok Ghebru

**Born:** October 1, 1982

**Biography:** Henok Ghebru is a 41-year-old single man who liked playing football and wanted to become an electrician. He worked in the family business and helped his father look after cattle. Henok became one of Jehovah's Witnesses in February 2004.

**Case History:** On January 24, 2005, Henok was detained when the army searched for young people on the street to force them to be trained in the military. He could not join the military since doing so would violate his conscience.

For years, Henok suffered from extreme pain as a result of a medical issue. Additionally, due to the harsh working

conditions in prison, he developed a back problem. He was allowed neither to consult a physician nor to receive medication from friends or relatives. After seven years, he finally underwent surgery. Henok's father was imprisoned four times for his faith, and many of his family members have been imprisoned for attending religious meetings.

## Recommendations by Preeminent Human Rights Bodies Ignored

Observers from other African countries have expressed serious concern because of the violation of Jehovah's Witnesses' basic rights, and regularly urge the authorities to rectify the situation

### UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL RAPPORTEURS ON THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN ERITREA

In 2014, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) welcomed the report of the then special rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth. That report urged the authorities to respect the right of conscientious objection “in accordance with international norms” and to “guarantee the physical integrity of all prisoners; ensure access to medical treatment for those in need; . . . and improve the conditions of detention in accordance with international standards.”<sup>1</sup> In a 2015 resolution, the HRC called upon the government of Eritrea to “provide for conscientious objection to military service.”<sup>2</sup>for conscientious objection to military service.”<sup>2</sup>

In her first report to the HRC, Special Rapporteur Daniela Kravetz stated:

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*“Jehovah’s Witnesses have no legal recourse and so cannot challenge their indefinite detention. The Special Rapporteur urges the Government of Eritrea to engage in dialogue with this congregation and release those in prison. She also urges the Government to provide members of this congregation with the opportunity to participate in a form of civil service that is consistent with their religious beliefs.”*

— REPORT OF THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON  
THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN ERITREA,  
A/HRC/41/53, DATED MAY 16, 2019, PAR. 40.

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<sup>1</sup>UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth, A/HRC/26/45, 13 May 2014, p. 21, pars. 103(f) and (i).

<sup>2</sup>UN Human Rights Council, Human rights situations that require the Council’s attention, Situation of human rights in Eritrea, A/HRC/29/L.23, 30 June 2015, p. 3, pars. 6 and 6(e).

Before the end of her mandate, Ms. Kravetz submitted her second report. Noting no improvement in the situation for Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea, she stated:

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*"The Special Rapporteur once again calls on the Government of Eritrea to release Jehovah's Witnesses from prison, recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service in law and practice, and allow for a substitute civilian service for conscientious objectors."*

— REPORT OF THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE  
SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN ERITREA, A/  
HRC/44/23, DATED MAY 11, 2020, PAR. 46.

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In a report dated May 12, 2021, Ms. Kravetz's successor, Dr. Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker, called on the Eritrean government to "immediately and unconditionally release all those who remain in prison without charge or trial because of their faith or belief," and to "review the decisions to strip Jehovah's Witnesses of their citizenship because of their religious affiliation, respect the recommendation of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to ensure that Jehovah's Witnesses retain their citizenship rights, and investigate the reported deaths in detention of Jehovah's Witnesses."

#### **AFRICAN COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON THE RIGHTS AND WELFARE OF THE CHILD**

In 2017, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) reported that, despite Eritrean claims that legal protections exist, "children who belong to the Jehovah Witnesses [sic]" face harsh treatment because of their religion. The ACERWC called on Eritrea to "recognise and fully implement a child's Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion with no discrimination."<sup>3</sup> A complaint filed with the ACERWC in April 2022, on behalf of the children of Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea (resubmitted May 2, 2023, with application for urgent provisional measures) is pending. The complaint documents how hundreds of children have been imprisoned, physically abused, expelled from school, and separated from their parents. Many families have risked their lives to escape from the country.

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<sup>3</sup>Concluding recommendations by the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) on the State of Eritrea's Report on the Status of Implementation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, p. 5, par. 13.

## AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN AND PEOPLES' RIGHTS

In 2018, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) urged Eritrea to "take urgent measures to address the denial of basic rights of all detained persons, including . . . members of the Jehovah Witness [sic] faith" and called for an investigation of the reported deaths of Witnesses in detention. The commission emphasized the need for Eritrea to ensure that Jehovah's Witnesses "retain their citizenship rights."<sup>4</sup>

On December 31, 2018, a complaint was filed with the ACHPR on behalf of three of Jehovah's Witnesses and was later joined by applications on behalf of the then 20 remaining imprisoned Witnesses. This complaint exhaustively documents the violation by Eritrea of the rights of incarcerated Jehovah's Witnesses, some for more than quarter of a century. On May 4, 2021, the communication was admitted. Urgent provisional measures were granted, and the president of Eritrea was urged to comply immediately. To date, the ACHPR has yet to receive a response. The communication has since been finalized and awaits a hearing and decision.

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*"The Commission recommends that the Government should . . . conduct prompt investigation of the reported deaths in detention of members of the Jehovah Witness [sic], and provide information in the next Report on the outcome of the investigations."*

- AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN AND PEOPLES' RIGHTS, CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE INITIAL AND COMBINED PERIODIC REPORT OF THE STATE OF ERITREA ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AFRICAN CHARTER ON HUMAN AND PEOPLES' RIGHTS, ADOPTED AT THE 63RD ORDINARY SESSION, NOVEMBER 2018, PP. 14 AND 15, PARS. 120 AND 120(X).

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<sup>4</sup> African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Concluding Observations and recommendations on the Initial and Combined Periodic Report of the State of Eritrea on the Implementation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, adopted at the 63rd Ordinary Session, November 2018, pp. 16 and 17, pars. xviii and xxviii.

In May 2019, the UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR) urged Eritrea to guarantee the effective exercise of freedom of religion and belief and to “release all persons arrested or detained for exercising their freedom of religion, including Jehovah’s Witnesses.”<sup>5</sup> The CCPR also requested that Eritrea “ensure the legal recognition of conscientious objection to military service and provide for alternative service of a civilian nature for conscientious objectors.”<sup>6</sup>

## Meetings With Officials

Eritrean officials have refused all requests to meet with representatives of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

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<sup>5</sup> UN Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on Eritrea in the absence of its initial report, CCPR/C/ERI/CO/1, 3 May 2019, p. 7, par. 36.

<sup>6</sup> UN Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on Eritrea in the absence of its initial report, CCPR/C/ERI/CO/1, 3 May 2019, p. 8, par. 38.





# ERITREA:

## Objectives of Jehovah's Witnesses

### JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES RESPECTFULLY REQUEST THE GOVERNMENT OF ERITREA TO:

- Engage in dialogue with Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss the issues raised in this report.
- Release all of Jehovah's Witnesses currently in prison and adequately compensate them.
- Accord Jehovah's Witnesses full rights and privileges as citizens of Eritrea, including returning or issuing documentation (e.g., passports and documents that would allow them to deal with business affairs, and freely move and travel).
- Permit Jehovah's Witnesses to register as a religion, and to peacefully exercise freedom of religion and freedom of assembly both as individuals and jointly with others.
- Recognize the right of each one of Jehovah's Witnesses to conscientiously object to military service and provide for a genuine alternative to military service that is nonpunitive and truly civilian, in harmony with international standards, so that they may serve their country with a clear conscience.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT:



AFRICAN ASSOCIATION OF  
**JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES**

African Association  
of Jehovah's Witnesses  
at [aajw.za@jw.org](mailto:aajw.za@jw.org).

Office of  
Public  
Information

Jehovah's Witnesses  
World Headquarters

Office of Public Information  
for Jehovah's Witnesses  
at [InboxOPI@jw.org](mailto:InboxOPI@jw.org).



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