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## Eritrea Doubly Evil

By **Doug Bandow** on 4.2.10 @ 6:07AM

Eritrea is not quite two decades old. But it has become an international problem, a source of instability and repression on the Horn of Africa. It also is one of the world's worst religious persecutors.

Eritrea was an Italian colony, administered by Great Britain after World War II, and then federated with Ethiopia in 1951. An independence movement soon became active. After three decades of war Eritrea became a separate nation.

The conflict was bitter and costly; for many years Ethiopia was controlled by one of world's most brutal communist regimes, which was complicit in the 1980s famine that killed an estimated one million Ethiopians. A bloody border war flared up between the two nations a dozen years ago. Eritrea also fought a brief war with Yemen over a disputed island. These conflicts have provided the governing regime an excuse for delaying elections and repressing human rights, including religious liberty.

Eritrea continues to have a malign impact on its neighbors. Last month the State Department reported that Asmara "acted as a principal source and conduit for arms to antigovernment, extremists, and insurgent groups in Somalia." Eritrea has responded to Washington's criticism with vitriol, accusing Washington of promoting chaos in the region. The State Department has suspended consular services at the embassy in Asmara and issued a travel warning for Eritrea.

As bad as the Eritrean government is for its neighbors, it is far worse for its own people. Eritrea is widely recognized by human rights groups and Western states as having an extraordinarily repressive government. It is one of "the world's most systematic human rights violators," according to the State Department.

The Department's 2009 Human Rights report catalogued a long list of abuses, including "abridgement of citizens' right to change their government through a democratic process, unlawful killings by security forces, torture and beating of prisoners, sometimes resulting in death, abuse and torture of national service evaders, some of whom reportedly died from their injuries while in detention; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions," and many more.

Last year Freedom House rated Eritrea "Not Free" and placed the country in the lowest category for political rights. Freedom House explained: "The government of Eritrea continued its long-standing suppression of democratic and human rights in 2008, and a group of independent journalists imprisoned in 2001 remained behind bars. The country also maintained its aggressive foreign policy in the region,

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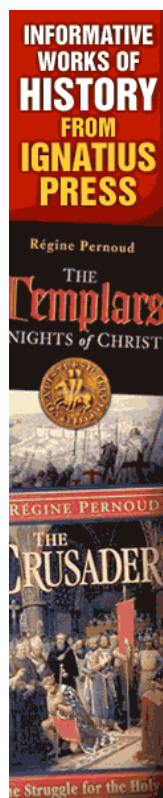
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initiating border-related clashes with Djiboutian forces."

Similarly, Human Rights Watch declared: "Eritrea has become one of the most closed and repressive states in the world. Thousands of political prisoners are detained in prisons and underground cells; there is no independent civil society; all independent media outlets have been shut down; the head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church is in incommunicado detention; and evangelical Christians are rounded up and tortured on a regular basis." Another HRW study referred to the government having "established a totalitarian grip on Eritrea."

Amnesty International has routinely detailed human rights abuses by the Asmara authorities. Last year, for instance, the organization noted that "The government prohibited independent journalism, opposition parties, unregistered religious organizations, and virtually all civil society activity." Moreover, Amnesty added, "thousands of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners remained in detention after years in prison."

Some countries establish political tyrannies while leaving people alone in their religious beliefs. Unfortunately, Eritrea fears freedom of conscience in any form. Freedom House pointed to "significant limitations on the exercise of faith." A review directed by Paul Marshall of the Hudson Institute explained that "The government had long used the threat of real or perceived enemies to generate popular support." Those targeted include religious believers. Noted the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "government spokespersons have cited Pentecostals, along with Muslim extremists, as threats to national security."

The Asmara regime routinely assaults religious liberty. The Commission said last year: "The government of Eritrea continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom." A recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found government restrictions on religious freedom to be "very high" in Eritrea, placing that nation among the ten worst nations rated.

Since 2004 the State Department has targeted Eritrea as a "Country of Particular Concern." Last year Open Doors ranked Eritrea at number nine on its watch list, up from number eleven the year before. This year Eritrea fell back to number eleven, its relative improvement primarily reflecting the worsening of conditions in Laos and Uzbekistan, which moved up on the list.

Last year International Christian Concern placed Eritrea at number nine in its annual Hall of Shame. According to the ICC the intensity of persecution was "high" and "increasing." In the ICC's report this year the group abandoned its attempt to rank persecutors, but again included Eritrea among the worst ten. Eritrea placed among the top four in intensity of persecution, along with North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Somalia.

The Institute on Religion and Public Policy reports that the Asmara government recognizes only four churches: "the government routinely fails to approve registrations" and "interferes in the everyday workings of registered religious groups at the highest levels." The State Department echoed that conclusion: "The government continued its involvement in the affairs of the four approved religious groups." It is

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far worse, however, for those churches which are not authorized. State explained that "Authorities regularly harassed, arrested, and detained members of various religious groups. The government closely monitored the activities and movements of unregistered religious groups and members, including social functions attended by members."

The list of abuses is lengthy. Reported the Commission:

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**Doug Bandow** is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of *Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics (Crossway)*.

**COMMENTS**

#### **Ret. Marine | 4.2.10 @ 7:06AM**

Read this story again trools before you begin to berate those of us, the Patriotic American types, for our love of liberty and laws. This story, if left unchecked, could be yours to experience. Lets take it to another level. If you fear those of us who believe in our duty and maybe in some cases our deaths, as a measure of your acceptance in and around our lives, as the ultimate last word of our faith in the American experience, you lose. Take this story and ask yourself, if all the people who you claim to be neanderthals, nazi's, disgusting as it is even teabaggers, uneducated or what ever moniker you wish to place upon us, are gone from the scene, who then will be left to protect you against a government that is this story, that is becoming known day by day, this current rouge anti-american administration, the admirers of marxist revolutionaries and Moa mumblers. Do you really think this could not happen here, right here in these United States. Think again, it very well could. The premise of this story and the resemblance of this current administration are not that far apart. You could say it can happen here but, to admit this, you would have to acknowledge there is evil in this world, and evilness in the minds of our supposed leaders. If you refuse to acknowledge this evil, it will appear and gladly enter into agreement with you, you may then realize the consequences of your vote, the theft of the American family traditions, the failed, and downright theft of the average productive lives you so loath and the inherent spirit that is an American you continue to steal from, and call it your "right". I am stunned to read at times the attitude of your intentions, name calling the belittling of your fellow man, thinking that you somehow have a "right" to even spew your lazy mind games you like to play from time to time, and even more so, down right angry to see the clear message this story represents, and somehow you don't get it.

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#### **Debunker | 4.2.10 @ 7:44AM**

Historically, as Eritreans, we have seen a level of unparalleled hostility directed at our desire for self-determination, especially, emanating from those exceptionally hostile elements within Langley and Foggy Bottom neighborhoods, as well as, Kremlin. Be that as it may, the aim of this piece is not to rehash the all too well know facts of military and political supports rendered by the Imperial Centers of the time, Moscow and Washington, to eliminate the aspiration of the Eritrean people and their struggle movements for self-determination. The aim here is to look at - in view of current US-Eritrea relations - the literary work of one of the world's renowned authors, Thomas Keneally, the author of 'To Asmara' and