HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

# WORLD REPORT 2025

EVENTS OF 2024

# World Report 2025

## Events of 2024

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# 2024: A Year of Reckoning

By Tirana Hassan, *Executive Director*

This has been a year of elections, resistance, and conflict, testing the integrity of democratic institutions and the principles of international human rights and humanitarian law. Whether in response to heightened repression in Russia, India, and Venezuela, or catastrophic armed conflicts in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine, governments around the world are being called upon to demonstrate their commitment to human rights, democracy, and humanitarian action. Many have failed the test. But even outspoken and action-oriented governments have invoked human rights standards weakly or inconsistently, feeding global perceptions that human rights lack legitimacy.

That is an irresponsible and dangerous conclusion, and conveniently absolves governments of their legal obligations to uphold international human rights law both at home and in their actions abroad. Reflecting on the events of 2024, this is not a moment to retreat from the protections needed by everyone everywhere. Instead, governments should respect and defend universal human rights with more rigor and urgency than ever, and people and civil society need to remain steadfast in holding them accountable.

## The Power of Popular Resistance

Elections need to abide by human rights standards, but elections are never an end in themselves. While rigged and otherwise unfair elections are a sign of more rights violations to come, even free and fair elections don't necessarily mean a rights-respecting future. Although over 70 countries conducted national elections in 2024, their full impact on human rights will only be felt in what follows.

Racism, hate, and discrimination drove many elections in the past year. In the United States, Donald Trump won the presidency for a second time, raising concerns that his new administration would repeat and even magnify the serious rights violations of his first term. Likewise, in the European Parliament elections of 2024, far-right parties made significant gains, exploiting anti-immigrant sentiment and nationalist rhetoric to advance policies that threaten minority communities and undermine democratic norms.

Yet elsewhere, there was meaningful democratic resilience, as voters proved unwilling to accept populist agendas and held leaders and their parties accountable. In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's hate speech on the campaign trail did not win him the electoral majority he craved, showing that even in the face of systemic challenges, democracy can still put a check on power.

Authoritarian leaders tightened their grip on power in countries such as Russia, El Salvador and the Sahel nations of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, leveraging fear and misinformation to stifle dissent.

Under President Xi Jinping, China continued its relentless campaign of repression to enforce loyalty to the one-party state, silence any form of dissent – including within the Chinese Communist Party itself – and stifle any attempts to foster an independent civil society, support an independent judiciary, or protect the rights of ethnic minorities and other minority groups. Beijing authorities further curtailed basic freedoms in Hong Kong, where several dozen pro-democracy activists were sentenced to prison terms under the territory's overbroad new National Security Law. Beijing's repression also extended across borders, targeting Chinese human rights defenders, government critics, journalists abroad, and members of the diaspora through surveillance, harassment, digital threats, and coercion by proxy against family members inside China.

But deepening authoritarian repression also fueled civic mobilization around the world. In Bangladesh, students protesting corruption, democratic erosion, and restrictive job quotas grew into a national movement that ultimately led its long-term repressive leader, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, to flee the country. Despite violent crackdowns, the protesters persevered, forcing the formation of an interim government that has pledged human rights reforms.

In Venezuela, tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets to demand a fair counting of their votes, even against the backdrop of a decade of brutal repression by the government of Nicolás Maduro. In Kenya, widespread demonstrations challenged economic inequality and demanded accountability for public resources and electoral promises, reflecting the public's discontent with stagnating reforms.

In Georgia, nationwide protests erupted over the ruling party's decision to abort the European Union accession process, which many saw as sealing the government's hard turn away from democratic values and its pivot toward authoritarianism.

In South Korea, President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law to ban political activities and suspend most civil liberties. Within minutes of his announcement, thousands of people marched in protest to the National Assembly, where military special forces tried to block assembly members from voting to lift the martial law decree. The National Assembly overturned martial law a mere six hours later, and 11 days later impeached President Yoon.

These resistance movements highlight a crucial reality: the fight for rights is often driven by ordinary people, fed up with injustice and corruption, bringing together their collective power to compel governments to uphold basic rights and serve the people instead of their own interests.

## Conflicts, Crises, and Eroding Norms

The past year was also marked by armed conflicts and humanitarian crises, exposing the fraying of international norms meant to protect civilians and the devastating human cost when they are flouted. These include horrific instances of international inaction and complicity in abuses that further human suffering, most notably in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, and Haiti.

In Gaza, Israeli authorities have imposed a blockade and committed numerous unlawful attacks and forced displacement that amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. They have deliberately deprived Palestinians of access to water required for survival, which is a crime against humanity and may amount to the crime of genocide. Israeli strikes have killed and wounded tens of thousands of civilians, deliberately targeted hospitals, residential buildings, and aid workers, and devastated schools and camps sheltering displaced families, leaving no safe haven from the hostilities and destroying the infrastructure necessary for survival.

Despite clear evidence that Israeli forces used their weapons to commit atrocities, the US, Germany, and other governments have continued to provide arms and military support to

Israel, violating international legal obligations and domestic law. New use of surveillance technologies, artificial intelligence, and other digital tools on the battlefield risks further civilian harm and raises more questions about accountability for governments and tech companies involved.

In Sudan, the conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has resulted in widespread atrocities against civilians, including war crimes and crimes against humanity as part of the RSF's ethnic cleansing campaign in West Darfur. Across the country, the warring parties have committed mass killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement.

The global response to Sudan has been grossly inadequate, emboldening commanders to commit even greater abuses. While the International Criminal Court (ICC) has sought to amplify the urgency to act and bring abusers to justice, the United Nations Security Council has yet to establish a badly needed civilian protection presence in the country. The governments supplying arms to the warring parties have shown utter disregard for civilian lives, exposing the need for a global response to uphold humanitarian principles and human rights norms.

Russia continued for a third year its large-scale attacks on Ukraine's energy grid, hospitals, and other infrastructure, killing and injuring many civilians. Russian authorities in occupied areas have forcibly and methodically sought to erase Ukrainian identity, including by imposing the Russian curriculum and Kremlin propaganda in Ukrainian schools. While many EU governments and the US have expressed a commitment to justice for the grave crimes by Russian forces, accountability has been slow going.

In Haiti, violence has reached catastrophic levels. Criminal groups intensified large-scale, coordinated attacks, killing thousands of people, recruiting children, and raping women and girls. The deployment of the UN-authorized and largely US-funded and Kenyan-led Multinational Security Support mission in June offered hope to many that security might soon be restored. But governments have yet to provide the mission with enough resources to make it fully operational, resulting in a deteriorating situation.

Let us say the quiet part out loud: when governments fail to act to protect civilians at dire risk, they not only abandon them to death and injury, but they also undermine norms that

provide protection to people worldwide, ultimately leading to a situation where everyone is worse off.

This race to the bottom exacts a toll that is far reaching, often extending well beyond those directly affected by the conflict to include forcing people from their homes, preventing healthcare and aid workers from reaching civilians in need, denying children an education, and creating even greater risks for people with disabilities. Human rights are not abstract ideals; they are the foundation of human dignity and survival, and it is in our shared interest to protect them.

## The Limits of Autocratic Rule

In December, a coalition of opposition armed groups overthrew the deeply repressive government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, ending over 50 years of Baath Party rule. Emblematic war crimes and crimes against humanity under Assad included torture, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, use of chemical weapons, starvation as a weapon of war, and indiscriminate and deliberate attacks against civilians and civilian objects.

It is too soon to tell what Syria's future holds or whether millions of Syrian refugees will be able to return safely. Indeed, the armed groups operating in Syria, including Hay'et Tahrir al Sham and factions of the Syrian National Army that joined the offensive, are also responsible for human rights abuses and war crimes. Whoever emerges as Syria's new leadership should make a full and determined break from the repression and impunity of the past and chart a rights-respecting path for all Syrians, regardless of ethnic or religious background. Holding all those responsible for serious abuses to account is a critical step in that direction.

Despite this uncertainty, the events in Syria offer insight into the limits of autocratic power.

Even longstanding autocracies can be very fragile. Autocrats who rely on other governments to maintain their repressive rule are susceptible to their partner states' shifting political calculations. For many years, Assad was able to maintain an iron grip on power because of Syria's military alliance with Russia – an alliance that resulted in

countless atrocities, including crimes against humanity, against the Syrian people. In the face of mounting evidence of grave abuses, Russia used its permanent seat at the UN Security Council to shield Syria from sustained international pressure and action. But Russia diverted its resources and support from Syria following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, contributing to Assad's military vulnerability and exposing Russia's limits as a patron of repression.

## Leadership Lessons and Opportunities

The past year has once again highlighted an often-disregarded reality: liberal democracies are not always reliable champions of human rights at home or abroad.

US President Joe Biden's foreign policy has demonstrated a double standard when it comes to human rights, providing arms without restriction to Israel despite its widespread atrocities in Gaza, while condemning Russia for similar violations in Ukraine, and failing to address serious rights abuses by partners like the United Arab Emirates, India, and Kenya. Donald Trump's return to the White House not only threatens rights within the US but will also affect, by commission and omission, respect for human rights abroad. If the first Trump administration's attacks on multilateral institutions, international law, and the rights of marginalized groups are any indication, his second term could inflict even greater human rights damage, including by emboldening illiberal leaders worldwide to follow suit.

Europe, too, faces significant human rights challenges. A growing number of European governments have used economic stagnation and security issues as a pretext to justify their selective jettisoning of rights, especially of marginalized groups and migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, while failing to take credible action to improve economic and social rights. Authoritarian leaders have gained ground in elections with their discriminatory rhetoric and policies being normalized by mainstream parties that adopt their agenda even as many voters resist their advance.

This fragmented political landscape reflects a broader truth: the shared values and commitment of human rights for all cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, the appeal of populist leaders lies in their willingness to scapegoat minorities and foreigners and offer voters the mirage of "solutions" in exchange for trading away their rights and the rule of

law. Yet when everyone's rights and dignity are protected, societies flourish, highlighting their inseparable link.

The past year reinforced the importance of looking to governments across regions to display bold leadership on human rights and accountability – and they will need to do so more often. Mexico and Gambia led the charge in galvanizing cross-regional support in the UN General Assembly to move ahead on a draft crimes against humanity convention, a critical step to support domestic prosecutions of widespread and systematic crimes against civilian populations even in the absence of armed conflict.

Sierra Leone and the Dominican Republic joined Luxembourg to champion a new multinational treaty to strengthen the right to education to ensure free schooling at the preprimary and secondary levels for all children, which could reduce poverty and inequality and support the realization of other rights.

When governments call out violations of international law, as South Africa did in bringing a case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) alleging Israel's violations of the Genocide Convention in Gaza, or several states in contesting the Taliban in Afghanistan for violating the UN convention on women's rights, it can raise the bar for its enforcement.

The ICJ's string of provisional measures ordering Israel to prevent further harm to the Palestinian population in Gaza may have had limited effect so far in stemming Israeli abuses, but they have contributed to increased scrutiny of governments supplying Israel with weapons.

Thus the United Kingdom suspended some arms export licenses to Israel following a review that certain exports posed a clear risk of being used to commit or facilitate abuses, which reflects how pressure is growing for governments to rethink arms transfers to Israel.

## The Architecture of Accountability

As we face the uncertainties of 2025 and beyond, meeting these challenges will require evolution and imagination. The inability or, in some instances, unwillingness of governments to collectively work to save lives in crises like Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, the Sahel, Haiti, and Myanmar underscores why independent institutions like the ICC are

critical in the fight to protect rights. In the past year, the ICC investigated and issued arrest warrants for senior officials accused of crimes in Ukraine and Palestine, with a warrant application pending for an individual from Myanmar.

An ever-present hurdle is rallying the political will of governments to arrest ICC suspects and deliver them to the court – which is why the consistent support of ICC member countries is critical for securing justice, almost always a long game. The challenge is especially acute given the mounting pressure from Russia, China, and the US to undermine the ICC's mandate and operations and undercut funding for human rights mandates across the multilateral system.

That is precisely why all governments should be vigilant in calling these threats for what they are: a willingness to embrace impunity when justice threatens states' interests, no matter the high cost for civilians. States should also double down on their financial and political support for independent bodies like the ICC and UN commissions of inquiry so they can robustly deliver on their accountability mandates.

Every voice in support of rights matters. Civil society organizations are more important than ever and can play a critical role in defending everyone's rights, protecting minorities, and holding governments accountable, including by challenging populist narratives that frame rights as obstacles to progress. Many authoritarian governments have taken steps to silence and dismantle civil society organizations that speak out for human rights. Governments and leaders of multilateral institutions need to stand firm against efforts to erode independent checks on power – such as nongovernmental groups and the media – that are critical to protecting human rights.

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The events of the past year have underscored the importance of defending international human rights norms and democratic institutions in the face of the craven unwillingness of many governments to stand up to suffering and abuse. The year has shown the resilience of those who dare to resist oppression and the power of courage to deliver progress, even in the darkest times. The ICC offering a path to justice for victims and survivors in Myanmar, Israel and Palestine, and Ukraine; the activists who are fighting for change in

Georgia, Bangladesh, and Kenya; and the voters rejecting authoritarian rule in key elections like Venezuela are all reminders that the fight for rights is very much alive.

The task before us is clear: governments have a responsibility to push back against efforts to roll back international human rights law and norms. They need to defend space for free expression and peaceful assembly; to reinforce the architecture and effectiveness of accountability and to bring rights abusers to justice, no matter how powerful; and to amplify the voices of those who have been silenced. For when rights are protected, humanity flourishes. When they are denied, the cost is measured not in abstract principles but in human lives. This is the challenge – and the opportunity – of our time.

# Afghanistan

The situation in Afghanistan worsened in 2024 as the Taliban authorities intensified their crackdown on human rights, particularly against women and girls. Afghanistan remained the only country where girls and women were banned from secondary and university education, while also facing significant barriers to employment and freedom of movement, assembly, and speech. The Taliban also detained journalists and critics and imposed severe restrictions on the media. Afghanistan's economic crisis left 23 million in need of humanitarian assistance; women and girls were disproportionally affected.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

Taliban edicts violated the rights of women and girls to education, employment, freedom of movement and expression. The Taliban have also dismantled protections for women and girls experiencing gender-based violence, created discriminatory barriers to their accessing health care, and barred them from playing sports and visiting parks. Strict hijab and *mahram* (male guardian) regulations have impeded women from traveling for work or to receive medical treatment.

In August, the Taliban announced a new law on promotion of virtue and prevention of vice, which prohibits women from traveling or using public transportation without a male guardian. Under the law, women and girls are required to cover their faces in public and are prohibited from singing in public or letting their voices be heard outside the house. The Taliban also detained women and girls for not abiding by the prescribed dress code. UN experts have reported that some of those detained have been held incommunicado for days and subjected to "physical violence, threats and intimidation."

The UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, has described "an institutionalized system of discrimination, segregation, disrespect for human dignity, and exclusion of women and girls." In September, the Taliban banned Bennett from visiting Afghanistan.

## Economic and Humanitarian Crises

More than half of Afghanistan's population—23.7 million people— needed urgent humanitarian aid and assistance in 2024, with 12.4 million people facing food insecurity and 2.9 million at emergency levels of hunger. As of November, the UN Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan had received only 31 percent of the needed funds, and humanitarian programs had closed because of the lack of resources. The loss of foreign assistance has severely harmed Afghanistan's healthcare system and exacerbated the health impacts of malnutrition and illnesses from inadequate medical care.

Women and girls have been disproportionately affected by the healthcare crisis. The Taliban's ban on women's employment and restrictions on their movement outside the home have compounded the crisis by creating additional discriminatory obstacles to delivering and receiving assistance on an equal basis. Bans on secondary and university education for girls and women have also meant a shortage of women healthcare workers.

Among those most affected by the healthcare crisis are people with disabilities. Because of aid shortfalls, the few services that had been available for people with disabilities, including physical rehabilitation and mental health support, have largely disappeared since the Taliban takeover in 2021.

## Extrajudicial Killings, Enforced Disappearances, and Torture

In two reports covering the first and second quarters of 2024, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 98 cases in which the Taliban carried out arbitrary arrest and detentions, and 20 instances of torture and ill-treatment of former government officials or security personnel. Nine members of the former government's security forces were killed. UNAMA also received reports that individuals who were forced to return to Afghanistan from Pakistan were also subjected to torture, mistreatment, and other forms of harm. Taliban authorities carried out corporal punishments, including public floggings of at least 147 men, 28 women, and four boys.

LGBT people in Afghanistan faced persecution and serious ill treatment that could amount to torture because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

## Attacks on the Media and Civil Society

The Taliban curtailed freedom of expression and the media and arbitrarily detained and tortured journalists and other critics. In September, they banned live broadcasts of political programs, criticism of the group, and limited interviews to individuals from a pre-approved list.

The Taliban continued to arbitrarily arrest media workers in 2024, usually detaining them for several days. On May 4, they arrested a journalist in Parwan province on allegations of sharing information with the Afghan diaspora media. He was released after three days. On February 17, Mansoor Nekmal, the editor in chief of Khaama Press, was detained in relation to a report on the enforcement of the hijab decree in Kabul. He was released the next day. On February 10, Saifullah Karimi, a Pajhwok News Agency journalist, was detained after requesting an interview with a Taliban official about the protests by restaurant and hotel owners over tax increases. He was released two days later. On January 18, Jawad Rasouli and Abdul Haq Hamidi from Gardesh-e Etilat News Center were arrested and then released; on January 17, Ehsan Akbari was arrested in Kabul and released on January 25. In most cases, Taliban authorities did not provide any information about the basis for these arrests or if those in custody would face trial. Detainees also lacked access to lawyers; in most cases even their family members were not allowed to visit them.

On September 26, Jawed Kohistani, a well-known political analyst was detained by Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) in Kabul and was released on October 15.

## Afghan Refugees

More than 665,000 Afghan refugees were forced back to Afghanistan after Pakistan launched a campaign in late 2023 of intimidation, arrests, and deportations targeting "illegal foreigners." Many had lived in Pakistan for decades or had been born there. Those arriving in Afghanistan faced severe economic hardship, and a lack of housing and access to schools.

Resettlement of Afghan asylum seekers and refugees in the US, UK, Germany, Canada, and other countries has been slow and limited, leaving thousands of Afghans who fled the Taliban in limbo in Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and other countries.

In July, the UK announced a policy change, introducing a route to allow some Afghans to reunite with their families who were evacuated to the UK after August 2021. However, serious problems with the UK's relocation and resettlement programs have meant that, three years on, many at-risk Afghans including women and girls, have no safe pathway to resettlement in the UK.

## Attacks on Civilians

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Afghan affiliate of the Islamic State (ISIS), launched several attacks against ethnic and religious minorities, especially the Hazara community, as well as attacks on the Taliban that injured and killed civilians. On May 18, ISKP issued a statement threatening NGOs, media, and foreign aid agencies.

On September 12, ISKP claimed responsibly for killing 14 men in Daikundi province. The killings took place in a remote border district between Daikundi, which has a predominantly Hazara population, and Ghor provinces. ISKP claimed responsibility for an April 29 attack in which a gunman opened fire on worshippers inside the Shia Sahib-u-Zaman mosque in Guzara district, Herat province, killing six people. On January 6, ISKP claimed responsibility for an attack on a passenger bus in the in Dasht-e Barchi area, a predominantly Hazara neighborhood in Kabul, that killed at least 5 and wounded 20 people.

On September 2, ISKP carried out a suicide attack outside the Taliban's prosecution office, killing at least 21 people, most of them civilians.

Cross border fire by Pakistani security forces in May caused 25 civilian casualties, including nine deaths. Airstrikes by the Pakistani military in Khost and Paktia killed eight civilians in March.

## Justice and Accountability

In September, the UN human rights office presented a report on Afghanistan highlighting the importance of addressing decades of conflict and impunity for widespread human rights abuses and specifically referred to states involved in past military interventions needing to take responsibility for accountability for violations by their nationals.

In 2024, there was no reported progress in the first war crimes charges against a soldier accused of murdering an Afghan civilian in 2012. A UK independent inquiry into alleged abuses by the country's special forces during detention operations in Afghanistan between 2010-2013 continued in 2024.

On September 25, Germany, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands, announced that they were initiating legal proceedings against Afghanistan before the International Court of Justice, alleging that the Taliban's systematic gender-based discrimination and violence violates Afghanistan's obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which Afghanistan ratified in 2003. It would be the first time a case has been brought before the court under this treaty.

The UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution in October underscoring the need to strengthen international efforts to advance accountability for past and ongoing abuses, including through the collection and preservation of evidence, but did not create a mechanism that could support these efforts.

# African Union

Throughout 2024, the African Union (AU) reaffirmed its commitments on the protection of human rights and democratic governance across the continent. AU leaders, however, demonstrated persistent lack of genuine and sustained political will, hindering the Union's ability to effectively engage in critical issues, including armed conflicts, with devastating consequences on civilians and widespread attacks on fundamental rights. The AU inconsistently responded to crises, at times failing to uphold its obligations, citing the principle of subsidiarity to regional bodies as a rationale for inaction.

## Institutional Updates

In September, 51 African heads of state, along with AU Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat participated in the China-Africa Cooperation Forum, which predominantly focused on development and funding issues, overshadowing pressing human rights concerns. Fewer than 20 African heads of state were in New York for the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) members discussed civil-military relations and conflict management in Africa on the margins of UNGA, without addressing the conflict in Sudan.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) convened four sessions in 2024. During its June session, it laid the groundwork for a comprehensive general comment on the right to development, reinforcing AU's leading efforts in this area.

The February 37th AU summit inaugurated education as the Union's yearly theme. Leadership of AU reforms changed from Rwandan President Paul Kagame to Kenyan President William Ruto, who had called for reforms granting the AU financial autonomy. The organization will elect a new chairperson in February 2025, to replace Mahamat, whose second term will expire.

## Rights, Peace Process in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The AU has relied heavily on regional initiatives to address the crisis in eastern Congo, with limited results, leaving civilians to bear the brunt of the ongoing conflict.

Throughout 2024, the Rwandan military and M23 armed group continued their offensive in the North Kivu, committing grave violations of international humanitarian law. The Congolese military and a coalition of abusive militias have also been implicated in laws-of-war violations in their response and increased the risk faced by displaced people. About 2.4 million people have been displaced, while fighting close to Goma has affected humanitarian aid delivery.

In July, the PSC reiterated the importance of the Nairobi and Luanda processes as "viable frameworks for reconciliation between the DRC and Rwanda." While the PSC expressed concern regarding the role of "negative forces" and encouraged direct dialogue between the two states, it has yet to publicly denounce the responsibility of Rwanda and other parties for abuse.

In March, the PSC directed the AU Commission to expedite funding from the AU Peace Fund Crisis Reserve Facility and facilitate transfer of equipment donated to the Southern Africa Development Community Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC), which deployed in January 2024. However, these limited contributions may not empower the mission to effectively support Congolese forces. SAMIDRC took over from an East African regional force, which withdrew its troops in December 2023.

The Luanda mediation process between Rwanda and Congo secured a cease-fire agreement between the Congolese armed forces and the M23 in July that was rapidly violated.

Despite raising alarm at the violations against displaced people in eastern provinces, the ACHPR is yet to take stronger action to address conflict-related abuses in eastern Congo, including denouncing abuses by all parties.

## Human Rights Crises in the Sahel: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger

Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger were suspended from the AU following unconstitutional government changes. The military authorities in the three countries have severely restricted fundamental rights and freedoms, shrinking the civic, political, and media space. Armed forces in Mali and Burkina Faso, alongside with Wagner fighters and allied militias, respectively, perpetrated serious human rights violations against civilians as part

of counterinsurgency operations against abusive Islamist armed groups, which gained significant ground in the Sahel region throughout 2024.

The AU has relied on the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to address regional issues. Yet the relationship between ECOWAS and Sahel countries seems irretrievably broken, with their withdrawal from the ECOWAS Treaty in early 2024, depriving their citizens from the possibility to seek justice for abuses through the ECOWAS court of justice.

The ACHPR has been monitoring individual cases of human rights violations in Burkina Faso, including of abducted prominent rights activist Daouda Diallo, and has called on the authorities to open an investigation into mass killings of civilians in Zaongo village, Centre-Nord region, in November 2023. The ACHPR requested an update on such investigations and raised allegations of enforced disappearances with the Burkinabè authorities as part of Burkina Faso's state reporting review in October.

The AU, including the ACHPR, did not sufficiently address widespread conflict-related abuses, including alleged crimes against humanity by Burkinabè security forces, as well as increasing crackdown by the junta on opposition, media, and dissent throughout.

On Mali, the ACHPR called out restrictions on civic space following the suspension of political parties and associations. It denounced the September 2023 attack on a boat by an Islamist armed group, while acknowledging further abuses by such groups, in apparent failure to address abuse by state actors and their allies.

## Failure to Protect Civilians Amid Persistent Atrocities in Sudan

Despite efforts to take leadership on international efforts to tackle the crisis in Sudan, at times mobilizing new mechanisms, including the High-Level Panel on the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan, the PSC-initiated committee of five heads of state, and the AU special envoy for the prevention of genocide and other mass atrocities, the AU failed to take concrete measures to prevent persistent atrocities in Sudan. The Union's efforts have apparently focused on securing mediation and a cessation of hostilities, falling short of protecting civilians who continued to bear the brunt of the conflict.

Human Rights Watch has been advocating for the AU to roll out a UN-backed civilian protection mission.

Since the conflict in Sudan between the Sudan Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces broke out in April 2023, countless civilians have been killed, and millions have been displaced internally and to neighboring countries. Both warring parties have exhibited a blatant disregard for international human rights and humanitarian law, resulting in war crimes and other atrocities, including grave violations against children.

On September 25, the PSC reiterated its call for a ceasefire and emphasized the need for measures aimed at protecting civilians in Sudan.

On June 21, the PSC condemned "the unprecedented catastrophic humanitarian situation" and violations of AU human rights instruments and international humanitarian law. It tasked the High-Level Panel on Sudan and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) with reporting on such violations to establish preventive measures and requested the AU Commission, in coordination with the ACHPR, to investigate and make recommendations on measures to protect civilians.

During a meeting on June 14, the PSC explored avenues for funding protection of civilians efforts under the yet-to-be-utilized facility created by UN Security Council resolution 2719. On May 21, the PSC requested that the High-Level Panel collaborate with the AU special envoy for the prevention of genocide to develop a strategy to stop atrocities and protect civilians. Persisting atrocities call for the continued inclusion of the special envoy in the AU's response.

In August, the ACHPR decided to undertake a joint fact-finding mission (FFM) with the AU Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security into the human rights situation in Sudan. The mission is composed of five commissioners, including holders of special mechanisms mandates, allowing it to address key dimensions of the ongoing crisis, such as sexual violence and the rights of displaced communities.

However, the planned duration of the investigation may limit its depth and efficiency, and it remains unclear whether or how the ACHPR will preserve evidence collected for purposes of criminal accountability for the ongoing serious crimes committed by the warring parties.

The inability of the joint FFM to access areas heavily affected by the conflict in the absence of consent from the warring parties raised significant concern. Given the challenges to conduct investigation in conflict-ridden areas in Sudan, access for the FFM team to neighboring countries is critical. Regardless of access, the joint FFM would require significant high-level political and financial support and protection of its monitors, to ensure it possesses the resources and legitimacy necessary to fulfil its mandate.

## Setbacks on Women and Girls' Rights

In May, the ACHPR adopted a regressive position on economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR) in its communication 564/15, arguing that "...each State sets itself objectives to achieve in order to fulfil them." This denies the objective nature of state obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil those rights, including sexual and reproductive health rights. The ACHPR also found that acts amounting to obstetric violence cannot be classified as degrading and humiliating treatment that results in women and girls delaying accessing maternal health care. This position contravenes definitions of torture in international human rights jurisprudence as well as research by civil society and journalists.

In April, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights of the Child's Continental Study on Teenage Pregnancy showed that one in every five adolescent girls in Africa get pregnant before they turn 19. Thousands of girls face discrimination or exclusion from schools because they are pregnant, parenting or married, amid mixed action from member states to protect girls.

## Cooperation with the United Nations

The AU and UN advanced plans for an AU-led peacekeeping mission in Somalia with the expiration of the current mission in December. The new mission will prioritize peace-building measures so as to "degrade Al Shabaab and provide security and prioritize the protection of civilians in Somalia." The PSC "strongly" emphasized the need for funding and requested that a mechanism in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2719 be established to ensure financial stability of the mission.

## Refugees' and Migrants' Rights

Through bilateral deals with African countries, previously denounced by the AU, the European Union and its member states continued to pursue border externalization policies, seeking to outsource and evade their asylum responsibilities.

The AU and member states continued efforts to implement the 2018 Global Compact on Migration, including through the Africa regional review. The ACHPR also adopted a new Protocol to eradicate statelessness.

An ACHPR March resolution called on states to reduce internal displacement and violations against displaced people.

## The Rights of Older People

Dozens of member-states are yet to ratify the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa, which at October 1 needed one more ratification to come into force. While the protocol provides important human rights protections, wider ratification and implementation in line with international human rights standards, particularly on the rights to legal capacity and to live independently within the community, are essential to ensure older people enjoy their rights on an equal basis with others.

# Algeria

Algerian authorities continued to crush dissent and close civic space by cracking down on critical voices and restricting freedom of expression, the press, association, assembly, and movement.

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune was re-elected for a second term in September in a climate of repression and muzzling of the media, absent genuine political debate.

Authorities continue to repress critical voices, including in the media, prosecuting activists, journalists, and lawyers for peaceful expression.

Authorities tightened criminal legislation and continued to use repressive laws against dissent, including anti-terrorism provisions.

## Presidential Election

Abdelmadjid Tebboune was re-elected for a second term with 84.3 percent of the vote in the September 7 ballot. During the election campaign, several dozen people were arrested in connection with peaceful statements or activism, according to Zakaria Hannache, a human rights defender monitoring the situation. Tebboune first acceded to the presidency in December 2019, after a low-turnout presidential election contested by peaceful Hirak protests and followed by arrests of dozens of activists.

## Freedom of Expression

Authorities continue to crack down on freedom of expression. Dozens of people have been detained in connection with the exercise of their fundamental rights, including activists, lawyers, journalists, and social media users, according to Hannache.

Activist Mohamed Tadjadit, who has been harassed by security forces and imprisoned several times since 2019, was arrested in January and detained on charges of "apology of terrorism" and "use of communication technologies to support the actions and activities of

terrorist organizations." He was released by presidential decree on October 31 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of Algeria's war of independence. On July 23, an Algiers court sentenced him in another case to six months' imprisonment for "publications likely to harm national interest" and "inciting an unarmed gathering."

On July 4, French-Algerian artist Djamila Bentouis was sentenced to two years in prison and a fine by an Algiers court in connection with a song she performed denouncing repression of the Hirak protests. Bentouis was interrogated at the airport upon entering Algeria in February and detained on March 3. She was charged under anti-terrorism legislation and convicted of "undermining national interest" in videos and "inciting an unarmed gathering." UN experts urged the Algerian Court of Appeal to overturn Bentouis' prison sentence and clear her of all charges. On October 2, her sentence was reduced to 18 months in prison on appeal.

On August 6, political activist and member of the suspended Democratic and Social Movement party, Yacine Mekireche, was arrested and detained for Facebook posts. He was charged with "spreading hate speech" and "inciting an unarmed gathering." He was sentenced in November to six months in prison.

## Freedom of Media

Authorities continued to crack down on the press and arrest and imprison journalists for carrying out their work. Reporters Without Borders ranked Algeria 139th out of 180 countries on its press freedom barometer for 2024, down three places from 2023.

In January, a Constantine court sentenced independent journalist Fouzia Amrani to a year's imprisonment – later reduced to eight months – for "insulting a state official."

On June 27, the director of online media outlet Algeria Scoop, Omar Ferhat, and its editor-in-chief, Sofiane Ghirous, were detained for airing a video critical of authorities and prosecuted for "spreading hate speech," according to the National Committee for the Liberation of Detainees.

On June 13, the Algiers Court of Appeal upheld the dissolution of Interface Médias, the media company of journalist Ihsane El Kadi, who was imprisoned for almost two years, for "operating an audiovisual communication service without authorization."

El Kadi, Ferhat, and Ghirous were released by presidential decree on October 31.

## Freedom of Association and Assembly

Algerian authorities cracked down on organized gatherings. They prevented the association SOS Disparus, which represents the families of thousands of people who disappeared between 1992-2002, from putting on two human rights events in Algiers in February and March.

On June 29, security forces raided a book presentation in a Béjaïa bookshop, preventing it from taking place. The book was not banned, yet authorities ordered the bookshop to close, claiming the event was banned. They arrested all attendees, including the author, her publisher, and the bookseller before releasing them a few hours later, according to the publisher.

On July 10, lawyer and human rights defender Sofiane Ouali was arrested after organizing a sit-in in front of the Béjaïa court to protest the arbitrary detention of his client, political activist Mira Moknache. Ouali was provisionally released on July 18 but is facing prosecution on terrorism-related charges.

On August 20, security forces prevented many people who had come to the village of Ifri Ouzellaguen for the commemoration of a historic event of Algeria's war of independence from accessing the site. They arrested several people, including activists from the Rally for Culture and Democracy political party, according to a lawyer.

In May, the UN special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association released his report from a 2023 visit to Algeria, in which he documented "repression and intimidation of individuals and associations critical of the Government." He called on authorities to respect the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; to lift travel bans imposed on civil society actors; to drop proceedings against those exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly,

association, or expression; and to repeal article 87 bis of the penal code on counter-terrorism, which is used “inappropriately” against human rights defenders, activists, and journalists.

## Freedom of Movement and Travel Bans

Since 2022, Algerian authorities have increasingly used arbitrary travel and entry bans to stifle dissent. While these bans are in many cases ordered by a public prosecutor, the time limits are almost never enforced, rendering them virtually indefinite.

In April, journalist Mustapha Bendjama, imprisoned over politically motivated charges from February 2023 to April 2024, was arbitrarily prevented from traveling to Tunisia.

In another instance of restriction on freedom of movement, Algerian journalist Farid Alilat was arbitrarily prevented from entering Algeria in April. He said he was questioned and held for several hours by security services at Algiers airport before being expelled to France, where he lives. The minister of communication, Mohamed Laagab, said that Alilat was banned from entering because his media outlet had taken “unfriendly stances” towards Algeria.

## Abusive Laws

New amendments to the penal code introduced on May 6 tightened existing repressive criminal legislation. The new provisions criminalized vaguely defined acts including “disclosing information deemed sensitive to national security, defense, or the economy,” “undermining the image of the security services” or “any act undermining investment.”

The authorities, who expanded an already overbroad definition of terrorism in June 2021 and established a list of “terrorist” entities and individuals, have increasingly used terrorism-related charges to suppress peaceful dissent ever since. On November 16, security forces arrested Algerian-French writer Boualem Sansal at Algiers airport. Subsequently, authorities prosecuted him on terrorism related charges."

A new law on the film industry came into force on April 29, further increasing authorities' control over film productions and introducing a prison sentence of up to three years for

financing or working in film productions contrary to vaguely worded criteria including "national values and principles," "national sovereignty," "national unity," or "the supreme interests of the nation."

## Migrants' Rights

Algerian authorities continued to arbitrarily and collectively expel migrants of various African nationalities, including women and children, to life-threatening conditions in the desert at the border with Niger, often without individual screenings or due process and accompanied by abusive treatment. Between January and August, Algeria expelled nearly 20,000 people to Niger. At least eight people reportedly died following the expulsions.

# Angola

Throughout 2024, Angolan police were credibly implicated in killings, sexual violence, excessive use of force, arbitrary detention, and torture and other ill-treatment of activists and protesters. Children continued to face the consequences of a drought and food crisis, with 38 percent of children in the country suffering from chronic malnutrition. President João Lourenço signed laws that fail to meet international human rights standards and severely restrict freedoms of the media, expression, and association. Angolan prisons continued to experience overcrowding.

## Police Brutality

Detainees accused police of carrying out extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, torture and other ill-treatment, and use of excessive force during arrests. In Lunda Norte province, police in March used live bullets to disperse a crowd of people who were protesting the alleged police killing of an artisanal diamond miner.

Angola's association of street vendors accused police of sexual assault, beatings, harassment, and illegal seizure of property of women street vendors across the country.

Police officers reportedly tortured six people in Luanda, Bié, and Lunda Sul provinces between April and June, to coerce confessions to crimes, according to a report by the local Mudei Movement.

In September, the police minister, Eugénio Laborinho, acknowledged that police officers on duty "regrettably make mistakes, some of which culminate in the loss of human life." He added that about 78 officers were expelled from the national police for misconduct between January 2023 and mid-2024.

## Children's Rights

Children continued to face the consequences of a worsening drought and food crisis, with 38 percent of the children suffering from chronic malnutrition. The country is one of the most affected by a major food crisis affecting Central and Southern Africa, according to the

World Food Programme. As of May, 1.5 million people, including thousands of children from the lowest income farming-dependent households, faced acute food insecurity in southern Angola. At least 22 children reportedly died from acute malnutrition.

In early 2024, Namibian authorities repatriated Angolans, including dozens of children—many unaccompanied—who were found begging or selling wooden artifacts in Namibia's cities and towns. Many of the children are from drought affected areas of Angola's southern Cunene, Huila, and Namibe provinces. They had fled the region and crossed the border to Namibia in search of food and jobs.

In May, health authorities said they were investigating the reported death in Luanda of more than 30 children under 12, who had symptoms such as stomach pain and fever, after consuming "very cloudy, yellowish water" that came out of taps in the Viana neighborhood. As of late November, authorities had not publicly presented the outcome of their investigation.

Dozens of children's foster homes in Malange province faced the risk of closure as the country struggles to recover from an economic crisis.

In its 2024 State Budget, the Angolan government reduced by 50 percent financial resources for the SOS Criança helpline, the only national helpline for children to call in cases of violence, abuse or neglect or to obtain information and referrals, according to UNICEF.

## Freedom of the Media, Expression and Association

On August 29, President Lourenco signed two laws that fail to meet international human rights standards and severely restrict freedoms of the media, expression, and association. The new law on the Crimes of Vandalism of Public Goods and Services provides prison terms of up to 25 years for people who participate in protests that result in vandalism and service disruptions. The new National Security law authorizes government security forces to prohibit public or private radio stations from broadcasting and to disrupt some telecommunication services under "exceptional circumstances" without a court order, which would seriously curtail media freedom.

The United Nations special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Gina Romero, had urged Angola's government and National Assembly not to adopt legislation that could be used limit basic rights.

The Committee to Protect Journalists said the bill could "severely undermine press freedom, further exposing journalists to harassment, intimidation, and censorship by authorities."

## Crackdown on Peaceful Protests

Angolan police arbitrarily detained peaceful activists and protesters throughout the year. Some of the detainees were later released without charge, while others were acquitted in court for lack of evidence.

In April, a court in Luanda acquitted 33 pastors and workers of the Pentecostal Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD) who were detained during a peaceful protest against the new leadership of the church. State prosecutors charged the group with disturbing a religious gathering, participating in a riot, disobeying police instructions, and offenses to physical integrity. The judge ruled that he found no evidence for the crimes.

In June, authorities released without charges, 11 activists arrested by police during a peaceful protest against government policies, which in their opinion were "impoverishing Angolans." The group also called for the release of political prisoners.

Authorities detained and later released after several hours without charge dozens of activists and protesters who peacefully demonstrated against the new vandalism law in August. The police also detained journalists who covered the protests and seized their work equipment.

## Poor Prison Conditions

Angolan prisons continued to experience overcrowding. The 43 prison units across the country have capacity for 22,554 inmates. The current prison population stands at 24,068 prisoners, half of them in preventive or pre-trial detention. The national director for human

rights, Yannick Bernardo has blamed excessive cases of preventive detention as the main cause of the overcrowding.

Authorities struggled to implement alternatives to prison time, introduced with the new penal code of 2020, including community service and house arrests.

Prison authorities reportedly committed abuses against four jailed activists who were convicted and sentenced, together with three others, by a Luanda court in September 2023 for "insulting the president" following their arrest just three days before, ahead of a planned protest. Amnesty International accused Angolan authorities of the deliberate denial of medical care to the activists, including urgent surgery, which may amount to torture or other ill-treatment.

# Argentina

President Javier Milei's first year in office was characterized by new human rights challenges, including cuts to social program funding, obstacles to people's ability to exercise the freedom of peaceful assembly, and hostile official rhetoric against journalists and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. While Argentina's longstanding economic crisis persisted and poverty rates continued to rise, high levels of inflation began to stabilize.

## Democratic Institutions

For years, Congress has failed to appoint an attorney general, an ombudsperson, and a Supreme Court justice, positions important to human rights that require a two-thirds majority vote in Congress for confirmation.

In April, President Milei nominated Ariel Lijo, a federal judge, to fill a Supreme Court vacancy, and Manuel García-Mansilla, a scholar, to fill another Supreme Court vacancy that opened in December, when a justice turned 75 years old.

Rights groups, citizens, business associations, and scholars have expressed concern over Lijo's record as judge. As of October, Lijo had five pending disciplinary investigations in the Council of the Judiciary, the body charged with investigating and removing federal judges. According to one study, he has faced 29 other disciplinary proceedings that were closed, including 16 *in limine*, meaning without any analysis. Some proceedings were based on evidence that Lijo delayed, and otherwise manipulated, investigations into corruption.

At time of writing, neither candidate had received sufficient support at a committee level to put their nominations to a vote in the Senate's plenary. If appointed, the five-member Supreme Court would be composed of only men—the only high court with such composition in Latin America.

At time of writing, the Milei administration had not nominated any candidate to serve as attorney general and Congress had not nominated an ombudsperson.

As of November, 300 federal and national judgeships remained vacant, accounting for almost one-third of the total positions. The Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that delays in appointments, which leave temporary judges serving for years, undermine judicial independence.

## Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

Year-to-year inflation was 193 percent as of October, the government reported, with housing, water, and energy prices increasing 285 percent. Following a sharp monthly inflation rate of 25 percent at the time former President Alberto Fernández's administration handed over to President Milei's, soaring levels of inflation began to stabilize in 2024, with a month-to-month inflation of 2.7 percent recorded in October.

As of June 2024, 52.9 percent of the population lived in poverty, a sharp increase from 27.5 percent in 2019. People living in extreme poverty—which the government defines as the inability to meet key elements of the right to food—amounted to 18.1 percent of the population. Two thirds of children under the age of 14 were living in poverty, and almost 3 in 10 were in extreme poverty.

President Milei's austerity plan drastically reduced government spending, impacting the financing of several social programs. A study showed that during the first four months of 2024, programs for victims of gender-based violence were cut by 70 to 100 percent. The reductions also affected programs providing medical attention to patients with cancer and fostering integration of people with disabilities. President Milei also vetoed laws passed by Congress to increase pensions and funding for public universities.

The government almost doubled the purchasing power of the child monthly allowance program, which benefits more than four million children under the age of 18.

## Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

In December 2023, the Security Ministry published a protocol that, in practice, criminalizes any disturbance to traffic arising from a demonstration. It also gives police broad powers to disperse demonstrations and allows the government to force protest organizers to pay

for police operations in response to protests and public property damage caused by demonstrations.

In January, three United Nations special rapporteurs asked the Milei administration to align the protocol with international standards on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly.

In June, when thousands protested outside Congress against a government-promoted bill, the police activated the protocol and responded by shooting rubber bullets and teargas, and punching protesters. Some protesters burned garbage cans and a car. Police arrested 33 people that day, the last of whom was released in September.

## Security Policies

In 2023, Argentina had a murder rate of 4.4 per 100,000 people, one of the lowest in Latin America. However, the city of Rosario, in Santa Fe province, had a rate of homicides five times higher than the average national rate, with local gangs fighting over control of the local drug trade.

In December 2023, the Milei administration sent more security officers to Rosario and implemented a plan to better coordinate security strategies with the local governments. The provincial government also tightened controls in prisons. As of October, murders in Rosario had decreased by 72 percent in 2024, compared to the same period in 2023.

In March, the Security Ministry published a resolution broadening the scope for security agents' use of firearms. The resolution allows for the use of lethal force in an overly broad set of circumstances and undermines both administrative and judicial accountability for police abuse.

## Attacks on Journalists

President Milei and high-level cabinet members have used hostile rhetoric to stigmatize independent journalists and media, usually through social media posts, speeches, and interviews that include a wide variety of insults and personal attacks. The Forum of

Argentine Journalists (FOPEA) said, in September, that the president had verbally attacked at least 45 journalists since he took office.

## Gender-Based Violence

Despite a 2009 law detailing comprehensive measures to prevent and prosecute violence against women and girls, the National Registry of Femicides reported 250 femicides—the murder of women and girls based on their gender—in 2023.

Gender-based violence is systemic and occurs in all sectors of society. In August 2024, former First Lady Fabiola Yáñez filed a criminal complaint accusing former President Fernández of gender-based violence. Fernández denied the allegations. A court was investigating the case at time of writing.

## Violence Against LGBT People

President Milei and members of his administration have made disparaging comments about same-sex marriage, gender identity, and inclusive sexuality education.

In May, a man threw a Molotov cocktail into a boarding house in Buenos Aires, killing three lesbian women and injuring another, an attack activists linked to rising anti-LGBT rhetoric.

## Past Abuses

The Supreme Court and federal judges, in the early 2000s, annulled pardons and amnesty laws shielding officials implicated in the 1976-1983 dictatorship's crimes. As of September, the Attorney General's Office reported that, of 3,732 people charged with crimes against humanity, 1,187 had been convicted, 1,213 died, and 192 acquitted; with the rest still being investigated.

In July, a group of congresspeople of the ruling party visited detainees serving prison sentences for crimes against humanity, including former Navy official Alfredo Astiz, who had been convicted in France and in Argentina for the kidnapping and torture in 1977 of two French nuns in Argentina, among others.

Court battles continue 30 years after 85 people died and more than 300 were injured in the bombing of the AMIA Jewish Center. No individual has been convicted. In June, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled that Argentina was responsible for the failure to prevent and investigate the bombing, and urged authorities to identify and bring to justice those responsible for the attack and its concealment.

## Foreign Policy

The Milei administration has increasingly opposed international resolutions on economic, social, and cultural rights and gender. At the UN General Assembly in September, President Milei rejected the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and his government opposed the Pact for the Future, a global framework to address issues such as inequality, climate change, and international financial governance. In October, Argentina was the only country to reject a declaration on gender equality at the G20 forum. That month, President Milei threatened to fire career diplomats who disagree with his foreign policy views.

# Armenia

Armenian authorities continued to face significant challenges in providing social security to over 100,000 ethnic Armenians displaced from Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region. Insecurities over the still unresolved conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan dominated public discourse throughout the year.

Frequent opposition protests demanding the prime minister's resignation presented public order challenges for law enforcement, whose use of crowd control weapons in at least one instance resulted in dozens seeking medical help highlighting ongoing concerns over accountability for police abuse.

Other areas of concern include intrusive surveillance, domestic violence, discrimination against people with disabilities, and violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

In February 2024, Armenia became the 124th state party to the International Criminal Court's founding treaty, the Rome Statute.

## Police Conduct

Lack of effective accountability for law enforcement abuses persisted.

On June 12, police and protesters clashed during a protest near parliament. Police reportedly exploded a large number of sonic grenades in close proximity to protesters while forcefully dispersing the crowd. Over 100 people sought medical assistance. The authorities charged 15 protesters with hooliganism, and one person for participation in mass riots. Trials were ongoing at time of writing. While the authorities investigated police conduct, they had pressed no charges at time of writing.

Armenian law did not, at that time, specifically provide a basis for use of the type of sonic grenades deployed on June 12. In July, the authorities added them to the arsenal of Interior Ministry police units but classified critical information about conditions for their use.

On April 15, Samvel Vardanyan, arrested after an altercation with a ruling party MP, reported that masked men assaulted him as police transported him to a detention facility. Police allegedly left Vardanyan unattended shortly before his assailants appeared to abuse him. Authorities investigated but have not charged anyone. Vardanyan was on bail awaiting trial on hooliganism and incitement charges at time of writing.

## Right to Privacy

In April, the government approved legislative amendments to "strengthen the security of public spaces," but in November, to its credit, announced it would drop the bill. If adopted, the bill would have required commercial entities in Yerevan to install video surveillance cameras and provide police with 24-hour access to live feeds and recordings on demand. This would have entailed arbitrary and unjustified intrusions on the right to privacy. The mere existence of video surveillance in publicly accessible areas can have a chilling effect on the rights to privacy and to freedom of assembly, association, and expression, among other rights.

Human Rights Watch wrote to the authorities in August, detailing how the proposed bill would violate rights and, in October, called on the government to scrap the bill or send it for expert review. The parliament initially postponed the second reading of the bill and, on November 11, the Interior Ministry issued a statement announcing that it would not pursue the second reading.

## Freedom of Expression and Information

In the first six months of 2024, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE), an Armenian group, documented 14 incidents of physical violence against 23 journalists and cameramen by police and private individuals during protests, and 43 incidents of other types of pressure.

Politicians and private businesses continued to bring defamation cases against journalists and media outlets, dragging them into lengthy legal battles and threatening heavy financial penalties. A local media advocacy group reported that, from January through June, media outlets faced 29 new defamation suits. In a positive development, the group

documented increasing resolution of disputes through the media ethics watchdog rather than courts.

## Right to Equality and Nondiscrimination

In June, the Justice Ministry presented for public discussion an anti-discrimination bill that does not include sexual orientation, gender identity, health status, or marital and family status as grounds for protection. Some officials argued that they are implied in the draft's other personal and social grounds for protection. However, the failure to specifically name them could lead administrative bodies or courts to exclude them, forcing victims to appeal rulings and creating unnecessary barriers to protection.

The bill also makes no provision for NGOs to bring public interest lawsuits on behalf of discrimination victims, something long advocated for by local groups.

## Disability Rights

Armenia continues to lack a comprehensive plan to introduce community-based services for people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities and continues to prioritize institutions and institutional care. Armenia also continues to allow courts to deprive people with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities of legal capacity and offers no supported decision-making mechanisms.

In May, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs disbanded the independent Monitoring Group for Institutions of Children, Older Persons, and Persons with Disabilities, which it had established by decree in 2018. Authorities claimed that the ministry was not authorized to establish the group. Armenian human rights organizations saw the move as retaliation for the group's public reporting on violations it had documented; authorities failed to meaningfully investigate the group's findings.

## Violence against Women and Girls

Authorities investigated 1,535 criminal domestic violence complaints through June, a significant increase over the 484 complaints investigated during the same period in 2023, and brought charges against 197 people. At least four women were killed between

September 2023 and September 2024, three by a family member. Three of the four women were over 60.

In a positive move, in April, parliament adopted amendments strengthening the country's domestic violence legislation. The amendments removed the reference to "family harmony" as the law's primary goal and extended the definition of acts of domestic violence to include, among other things, forced medical and psychiatric interventions, hindering access to medical care, virginity testing, prohibiting or hindering contacts with relatives and friends, and various forms of exercising control over a partner.

The amendments criminalized stalking as a standalone crime. They also clarified that perpetrators of domestic violence can include partners, former partners, and individuals in unregistered marriages, and specified that causing a child to witness domestic violence itself constitutes violence cognizable under the law.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people continue to face discrimination, harassment, and violence.

Fear of discrimination and humiliation due to public disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity and lack of trust in official investigations continue to prevent many LGBT people from reporting hate crimes against them. According to LGBT rights groups, investigations into such crimes are often inconclusive or ineffective and the charges brought often do not reflect the homophobic and transphobic motives of perpetrators. The criminal code does not explicitly recognize animus due to sexual orientation or gender identity as an aggravating circumstance in hate crimes cases and law enforcement bodies are still reluctant to consider such animus when determining what charges to file.

Local LGBT rights groups and activists documented 39 cases of physical violence, including 27 cases of violence committed by family members against LGBT people, from January through July. The groups also documented several cases of LGBT students dropping out of schools due to bullying. In one case documented by a group, the director of a child support center allegedly disclosed the sexual orientation of a new pupil to other children, disparaged her, and prohibited other children from interacting with her.

# Australia

Australia is a vibrant democracy that mostly protects the civil and political rights of its citizens. However, the country's rights record is marred by some key human rights concerns. This includes its treatment of children in the criminal justice system. Authorities have subjected children in detention to harsh conditions, including solitary confinement. In Queensland and Western Australia, children were incarcerated in facilities designed for adults.

Another significant rights issue is Australia's treatment of asylum seekers. Officials continue to subject individuals attempting to reach Australia by boat to offshore detention on the Pacific island of Nauru.

Australia remains the only Western democracy without a national human rights act or charter. In May, a parliamentary inquiry report recommended establishing a Human Rights Act to ensure effective protection of human rights under Australian law.

## Youth Justice

On any given day, about 700 children ages 10 to 17 are detained or imprisoned across Australia. First Nations children make up approximately 60 percent of the prison population.

Most Australian states maintain an age of criminal responsibility below the UN-recommended minimum of at least 14 years. In New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, the Northern Territory, and Western Australia, children as young as 10 can be held criminally responsible and incarcerated.

In August, the Victorian government reversed its commitment to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14, instead introducing legislation to raise it only to 12. In October, the newly elected Northern Territory government lowered the age of criminal responsibility from 12 to 10. The same month, Northern Territory authorities announced that spit hoods — a head covering that raises human rights concerns — would be again used on children.

In August, the National Children's Commissioner released a report highlighting that children in the criminal justice system were experiencing the "most egregious breaches of human rights" in Australia. The report called for a national response. It urged lawmakers to raise the age of criminal responsibility and implement a ban on solitary confinement for children.

Throughout 2024, authorities in Queensland continued to detain children in watch houses — concrete cells typically designed for short-term detention of adults. In September, an inspection report revealed poor conditions in the Cairns and Murgon watch houses, where children had spent weeks detained. The report highlighted overcrowding in the Cairns watch house and a complete absence of natural light in cells and common areas. In Murgon, children were deprived of fresh air, with no outdoor exercise available.

In Western Australia, authorities detained children in Unit 18, a wing of the maximum-security Casuarina Prison. In September, a 17-year-old boy died by suicide in Banksia Hill Detention Centre in Western Australia. This child had previously been held in Unit 18, where he reportedly endured "routine solitary confinement."

## Asylum Seekers and Refugees

Australia continues to evade its international obligations to asylum seekers by transferring individuals who arrive by boat to Nauru.

At the time of writing, an estimated 94 asylum seekers were on Nauru after being transferred there by Australian authorities. Asylum seekers have reported that officials have confiscated their smartphones and replaced them with camera-less phones, preventing them from documenting their conditions.

Approximately 44 male asylum seekers and refugees remain in Papua New Guinea. It is over a decade since Australia first transferred them there. They were previously held in the now-closed Manus Island detention center. This group also includes about 17 female partners and 34 children. The Australian and PNG governments have been in an ongoing dispute about payments for accommodation.

In November, the government passed new laws that grant it the authority to pay third-party countries to accept non-citizens, including recognized refugees, seek jail time for those who resist deportation, and ban phones from detention centers.

## First Nations' Rights

Following the unsuccessful Indigenous Voice referendum in 2023, the federal government has made minimal strides in advancing First Nations' rights.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced that his government would not move forward with establishing a Makarrata commission — a national body to facilitate truth-telling — despite prior budget allocations for its creation.

The disparities in Australia's criminal justice system remain enormous, with First Nations individuals hugely overrepresented. The current imprisonment rate for First Nations adults is around 2,266 per 100,000, compared to 149 per 100,000 for non-Indigenous Australians.

## Women's Rights

At least 15 women were killed by intimate partners in the first six months of 2024. Rallies calling for an end to gender-based violence were held across Australia.

In August, a parliamentary inquiry into missing and murdered First Nations women released its findings. The inquiry found First Nations women and children were overrepresented among missing persons and murder victims. It also heard evidence that Australia's policing and criminal legal systems discriminate against First Nations people including women and children and this is evident in inadequate responses to missing persons reports and homicide cases.

## Children's Online Privacy

In the absence of child data privacy protections, children continued to experience harm through the misuse of their personal data.

In July, the personal photos of 362 Australian children from all states and territories were discovered to be secretly scraped and misused to build artificial intelligence (AI) tools that in turn were used by others to create malicious deepfakes of other children. In June, girls in New South Wales and in Victoria reported that their social media photos had been manipulated, using AI, into sexually explicit deepfakes of them.

In September, the government committed to developing the country's first data protection law for children.

## Rights of Older People

In May, the federal government delayed introducing the new Aged Care Act until July 2025. Chemical restraint, the use of medications to control behavior without a therapeutic purpose, is widespread in aged care facilities. Despite Australia's obligation to prohibit torture, cruel and inhuman treatment, the Aged Care Bill introduced in September continues to permit abusive practices.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

An exemption within the federal Sex Discrimination Act allows religious schools to dismiss teachers and expel students based on gender or sexuality. LGBTIQ+ rights advocates continue to criticize the federal government for its failure to advance proposed amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act to safeguard students and teachers from discrimination.

The courts affirmed transgender rights protections under the Sex Discrimination Act when transgender woman Roxanne Tickle in August won her case against "women's-only" social media app Giggle, which had barred her from the platform.

## Disability Rights

The federal government released its response to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability in July. The government was criticized by disability rights advocates for only fully accepting 13 of the 172 recommendations directed to it.

## Environment and Human Rights

Australia remains one of the largest fossil fuel exporters globally, significantly exacerbating the climate crisis and its detrimental human rights impact.

Research released in August, found that despite presenting itself as a minor emitter, Australia is the world's second largest polluter when carbon emissions from fossil fuel exports are calculated.

In February, the Indigenous Nagana Yarrbayn Wangan and Jagalingou peoples initiated legal action against the Queensland government, alleging that it violated their human rights by failing to prevent the Adani coal mine from contaminating their sacred wetlands. Adani has rejected the claims and says its subsidiary company that operates the coal mine was fully compliant with environmental conditions.

In September, the federal government approved three coal mine expansions.

At the same time, Australia is experiencing bushfires intensified by the climate crisis, which have destroyed hundreds of homes.

## Right to Protest

Protesters in Australia risk criminalization, including financial penalties and imprisonment.

Over the past two decades, Australian federal and state parliaments have enacted 49 laws impacting the right to protest. Human Rights Watch research has found climate protesters have faced disproportionate punishments.

In September, police arrested dozens of anti-war activists in Melbourne who were protesting a weapons company exhibition. Victorian police confirmed they had used hard foam baton rounds and synthetic pepper spray on protesters.

## Sanctions and Other Forms of Accountability

The federal government continues to use its sanctions regime sparingly. In 2024, it only used its thematic human rights or corruption sanctions on entities or individuals in Iran, Russia, and Israel. Other sanctions were also placed individuals and entities in, for example, Myanmar, and affiliates of Hamas in Palestine. To date, no Chinese officials have been sanctioned by the Australian government.

Australia has not successfully prosecuted any members of its armed forces for war crimes in Afghanistan. In 2023 an Australian soldier was arrested for alleged war crimes, but this has not led to a trial. However, the Defence Minister stripped distinguished service medals from some Australian soldiers who served in Afghanistan. The Australian government has not yet compensated Afghan victims of Australian war crimes. Some progress, however, has been made with the government finally establishing regulations that will enable it to fulfill this commitment.

# Azerbaijan

The Azerbaijani government intensified its crackdown against domestic critics even as it hosted the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP29 in November. In the months before the conference, authorities arrested dozens of individuals, including journalists, human rights defenders, and activists, on politically motivated charges. They continued to interfere with rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly, and arbitrarily implemented laws paralyzing civil society. Torture and ill-treatment in custody also persisted.

Snap presidential and parliamentary elections in February and September, respectively, failed to meet standards for a free and fair vote. International observers found them "marked by the stifling of critical voices" and "devoid of competition."

In January, the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly resolved not to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation, citing the government's failure to fulfil "major commitments" it undertook when it joined the Council of Europe.

Azerbaijan and Armenia continued talks over a final peace deal, with continued border tensions sporadically escalating to clashes. Despite its stated commitments, Azerbaijan has not taken meaningful steps to ensure the right to return in safety and dignity for ethnic Armenians who fled Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 or to restore their property rights. A September 2023 Azerbaijani military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh re-established Azerbaijani control over the area.

## Prosecution of Government Critics

The authorities targeted high-profile critics in a new arrest wave in 2024, building on similar crackdowns in previous years. They leveled false or spurious charges against political opponents, journalists, and civic activists.

In August and July, authorities arrested two doctoral students on bogus treason charges. They are, respectively, Bahruz Samadov, an outspoken critic of the Second Karabakh War, and Igbal Abilov, who specializes in Talysh minority studies. Courts sent both to pretrial detention.

In a speech in September 2024, President Aliyev vilified peace advocates and non-governmental groups involved in peace initiatives.

In April, police arrested Anar Mammadli, head of an election monitoring group, on spurious charges. He remained in pretrial detention at time of writing. Mammadli is a founding member of a new coalition on climate justice, set up ahead of COP29.

Among other government critics arrested throughout the year on an array of bogus charges are former diplomat Emin Ibrahimov, economics commentator Farid Mehralizade, opposition activist Tofig Yagublu, online parliamentary analysis outlet founder Imran Aliyev, and online critic Famil Khalilov, whom Sweden had deported in 2023 following his unsuccessful asylum application.

All five remained in pretrial custody at the time of writing.

In April, authorities transferred academic Gubad Ibadoghlu, arrested in July 2023 on bogus counterfeiting and extremism charges, to house arrest; in May, they transferred him to police supervision and continue to conduct heavy surveillance on him.

The authorities also imposed travel bans on numerous individuals whom they are questioning in ongoing investigations. In August, they prevented independent researcher Javidan Aghayev from leaving the country and questioned him as part of the investigation against Samadov. In August, they barred Samad Shikhi, a journalist, from leaving the country as part of the same investigation.

A May 2024 presidential pardon did not include any individuals serving sentences on charges widely believed to be politically motivated.

## Freedom of Expression and Media

Starting in November 2023, the authorities targeted at least three independent media platforms, Abzas Media, Toplum TV, and Kanal 13, arresting their reporters and other staff on spurious smuggling charges. At least 12 media professionals and others affiliated with the outlets remain in pretrial detention, including reporters Ulvi Hasanli, Sevinj Abbasova

Vagifgizi, Hafiz Babali, Nargiz Absalamova, Mahammad Kekalov, Elnara Gasimova, Shamo Eminov, Mushvig Jabbarov, and Aziz Orujov.

In August 2024, the authorities pressed additional criminal charges against Abzas Media journalists and Mehralizade, including tax evasion, forgery of documents, and money laundering. At the time of writing, all journalists remain in pre-trial detention.

In March, shortly after the presidential election, police raided the office of Toplum TV, confiscating all of their equipment and sealing the office. They arrested five civic and political activists who shared office space and cooperated with Toplum. They are Akif Gurbanov, Ruslan Izzatli, Ilkin Amrahov, Ramil Babayev, and Alasgar Mammadli. All remained in pretrial custody at time of writing.

In August 2024, a court sentenced a man involved in 2023 environmental protests in Soyudlu on bogus drug possession charges. The man had printed the posters held during the protests.

## Torture and Ill-Treatment

The physical abuse of Fazil Gasimov detailed in court proceedings in 2024 was emblematic of a wider pattern of torture and ill-treatment of detainees. Azerbaijani authorities arrested Gasimov, an academic, in August 2023 immediately after his deportation from Türkiye. He testified in court that police put his head in a toilet and electroshocked him, among other things, to coerce him to incriminate Gubad Ibadoghlu. The trial court accepted testimony in which Gasimov stated his incriminating testimony in relation to Ibadoghlu had been coerced under duress. At time of writing, Gasimov remained in custody and on trial on spurious currency counterfeiting charges and had been on a hunger strike since June 2024.

On April 19, Imran Aliyev told a court during his custody hearing that police used electric shocks against him during his arrest to force him to “sign documents.” Five days later, Aliyev stated in appeals court that police beat him after they returned him from the April 19 hearing. The appeals court upheld his pre-trial custody, where Aliyev remains on a hunger strike at time of writing.

In May 2024, religious leader Taleh Baghirzade, serving a 20-year sentence, accused authorities of extremely poor conditions in custody, including chronic water shortages.

In July 2024, Abzas Media published a detailed account of torture allegations by the platform's imprisoned director, Ulvi Hasanli. Between January and July 2024, Hasanli documented at least 58 cases of alleged torture or ill treatment in the detention center where he is awaiting trial. His family believes that another inmate's violence and repeated threats of violence against Hasanli were at the behest of the authorities, in retaliation for his exposé.

Nine military personnel received prison sentences ranging from 4 years and 10 months to 13 years following trials held in June and October 2024, bringing to 18 the total number of military personnel sentenced for torturing military officers in the Terter region in 2017. The 18 were convicted on charges including torture and inhumane treatment, serious bodily harm, and abuse of office.

In July 2024, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) issued a statement about the Azerbaijani authorities' "outright refusal to cooperate with the CPT." The CPT said the authorities' persistent failure to engage with the committee marked "a fundamental and unprecedented breach" of the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture that established the CPT. Citing this failure, the committee unilaterally published its report on its 2022 ad hoc visit to Azerbaijan. The report described "numerous allegations of severe physical ill-treatment/torture" mainly to coerce a confession, provide information, or "accept additional charges."

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

For years, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in Azerbaijan have faced ill-treatment, extortion, arbitrary detention, and discrimination by state and non-state actors. Media accounts indicate that discrimination leaves some transgender people struggling to find appropriate housing and employment, having instead to rely on LGBT rights groups and women's organizations.

The government's escalating crackdown on civil society also affected LGBT rights organizations, which have either suspended or completely halted their work for security reasons. In April the European Court of Human Rights struck out a complaint filed by 24 people affected by Azerbaijan's 2017 anti-LGBT police campaign because the government admitted authorities had engaged in unspecified violations, and paid compensation. The 2017 police campaign involved arrests, violence, and torture of men presumed to be gay or bisexual, as well as transgender women. Applicants were "deeply dissatisfied" with the outcome because the government's acknowledgment "lack[ed] specificity regarding the nature and extent of the violations" and because the government did not commit to investigate or otherwise prevent future violations. They noted that LGBT people continued to be targeted by police and that the authorities still did not respond to harassment and discrimination against them.

# Bahrain

Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa granted amnesties to over 2,500 prisoners in 2024, including to more than 800 prisoners held unjustly for political participation and peaceful free expression. Yet, human rights defenders and political leaders, including Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, Hassan Mushaima, Dr. Abduljalil al-Singace, and Sheikh Ali Salman, have all remained arbitrarily detained. Furthermore, the Bahraini government has not commuted the death sentences of the 26 individuals who remain on death row.

## Closure of Political Space, Freedom of Association and Peaceful Assembly

Bahraini elections are neither free nor fair, and authorities systematically exclude and repress opposition voices. The Bahraini government has continued imposing restrictions on free expression, association, and assembly, in violation of Bahrain's international human rights obligations.

Members of Bahrain's political opposition are still imprisoned for their roles in the 2011 pro-democracy protests, as well as for political activism in recent years. They have faced brutal treatment from Bahraini authorities, including torture and denial of medical care. Human Rights Watch, along with several other human rights organizations, addressed a joint letter on May 30, 2024, to the 56th Session of the Human Rights Council, calling states' delegates to take a proactive stance and call on the Bahraini government to immediately and unconditionally release all individuals imprisoned solely for exercising their human rights.

Bahrain's "political isolation laws," introduced in 2018, barred former members of the country's opposition parties from running for parliament or sitting on boards of governors of civil society organizations. These laws also target former prisoners, including those detained due to their political work. Those affected by these laws also routinely experience delays and denials when applying for "Good Conduct Certificates," which Bahraini citizens and residents need in order to apply for employment, university admission, or even to join a sports or social club.

No independent media have operated in Bahrain since the Information Affairs Ministry suspended *Al Wasat*, the country's only independent newspaper, in 2017. Foreign journalists rarely have access to Bahrain, and international rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, have routinely been denied access.

## Death Penalty

Despite the large number of amnesties the Bahraini government granted in 2024, they did not commute the death sentences of the 26 individuals who remain on death row with their appeals exhausted. Since 2017, Bahrain has executed six people. Human Rights Watch has found that Bahraini courts have convicted and sentenced defendants to death following manifestly unfair trials, based solely or primarily on confessions allegedly coerced through torture and ill-treatment.

## Prison Conditions

After the death of Hussein Khalil Ibrahim in Bahrain's Jau prison on March 25, 2024, prisoners started a hunger strike to protest abysmal conditions and demand more access to healthcare services. Authorities responded harshly, depriving prisoners of breakfast and dinner, and cutting off air-conditioning, exposing prisoners to extreme heat at a time when temperatures exceeded 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit). While prison authorities have negotiated with protesting prisoners and addressed abuse against them in some cases, many prisoners still do not have access to electricity, and prison authorities continue to deny detainees adequate access to healthcare according to BIRD.

## Children's Rights

Bahraini authorities continued detaining children under 18 and subjecting them to ill-treatment in detention due to their participation in public protests. Between March and September 2024, Human Rights Watch interviewed several children who were previously exposed to torture and ill-treatment in detention and during interrogation. Some children reported difficulties continuing their education in prison or accessing medical services. Authorities in Bahrain have sentenced children to up to 40 years detention, in addition to fines for charges of protesting and disturbing public security, and burning cars and setting fires, among other charges.

As of December 15, 2023, authorities in Bahrain had arrested and harassed at least 25 children for their participation in pro-Palestine protests throughout the country, according to Human Rights Watch and Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) research.

## The Rights of Women and Girls

Women are required to obey their husbands and not leave home without a "legitimate excuse," under Bahrain's Unified 2017 Family Law. Women and girls can lose their rights to spousal maintenance (*nafaqa*) from their husbands if deemed disobedient or recalcitrant by a court. Bahraini family law (article 20) allows marriage of girls at age of 16 and even before if they got the permission of a Sharia court.

A woman also cannot act as her child's guardian, even if her child's father has passed away or following a divorce in which a court orders that her child reside primarily with her. The 1963 Citizenship Act prohibits women and girls from passing on their nationality to their children if they have a non-Bahraini father. Women face difficulty obtaining passports for their children, particularly when the child's father is abroad.

In February, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) published findings that included concern about the "shrinking space for women human rights defenders and reports of reprisals against them, including intimidation, harassment, threats, physical abuse, sexual violence, travel bans, and arbitrary detention."

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Although no law explicitly criminalizes same-sex relations, authorities have used vague penal code provisions against "indecency" and "immorality" to target sexual and gender minorities.

## Migrant Workers' Rights

Bahrain continues to enforce the *kafala* (sponsorship) system that ties migrant workers' visas to their employers, meaning if they leave their employer without their employer's

consent, they lose their residency status and can face arrest, fines, and deportation for "absconding."

Bahrain's Labor Law includes domestic workers, most of whom are women, but excludes them from key protections, such as weekly rest days, overtime, paid sick leave, and limits on working hours. Bahrain only requires a minimum wage for Bahraini nationals in the public sector. While Bahraini authorities launched their final phase of the Wage Protection System (WPS) in 2022, which requires all private sector workers to receive their wages through bank transfers, enrollment rates have been low, and unpaid wages remain a problem. Domestic workers are still not included in the WPS.

Since March 2024, Bahrain's General Authority for the Social Insurance Organization started collecting end-of-service contributions from employers to disburse to migrant workers instead of employers directly paying a lump-sum amount to workers upon the end of contracts. While a positive step that could address the non-payment of end-of-service benefits, the real test is in its effective implementation.

The 2024 Bahraini Cabinet decision to extend summer midday bans from two months to three months starting 2025 brings Bahrain's midday ban policy on par with its peers in the Gulf Cooperation Council, but remains insufficient in effectively protecting workers.

## Online Surveillance and Censorship

Bahraini authorities continued to block websites and forced the removal of online content, particularly social media posts criticizing the government. While social media remains a key space for activism and dissent, self-censorship is high due to the fear of online surveillance and intimidation from authorities.

On December 17, 2023, Bahraini authorities arrested opposition leader Ebrahim Sharif for a post on X (formerly Twitter) stating "his opposition to the normalization of his country with Israel and strongly rejected its participation in the American coalition against Houthis in Yemen," according to Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB).

Bahrain has purchased and used commercial spyware, including NSO Group's Pegasus, to target government critics and human rights defenders. In July 2024, Bahrain appealed a

ruling in a spyware case brought by two UK-Bahraini activists, Saeed Shehabi and Moosa Mohammed, before a UK High Court. The activists allege that Bahrain targeted their computers with surveillance software called FinSpy in September 2011.

# Bangladesh

An interim government headed by Nobel Prize laureate Mohammed Yunus promised accountability and reform after the increasingly authoritarian administration of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was removed in August by protesters.

In July, violence erupted after Hasina's Awami League party supporters and police attacked students peacefully protesting a politicized quota scheme for government jobs. Security forces used excessive force, including tear gas, stun grenades, and rubber and live bullets, to disperse protesters. But protests continued, and on August 5, Hasina stepped down and fled the country.

The Yunus government released thousands of people who were detained during the protests and invited the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to send a fact-finding team to investigate abuses during the protests and their root causes. In August, the interim government established a commission of inquiry into all enforced disappearances and acceded to the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearances. In September, the interim government established six commissions to reform the judiciary, the electoral system, public administration, the police, the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the constitution before promised free and fair elections. It later established four other commissions to make policy recommendations on media, health, labor rights, and women's rights.

The government decided to use the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), a domestic special court previously used to prosecute crimes against humanity committed during Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence, to prosecute human rights abuses during the July uprising. The ICT has been fraught with violations of fair trial standards, and while the interim government invited amendments to the Act that established the court to bring it in line with international standards, it still lacks some due process protections, and includes the death penalty, in violation of international human rights law.

## Abuses by Government Forces

Ahead of elections in January, security forces arrested tens of thousands of opposition members and supporters. The primary opposition parties eventually boycotted the polls and

Hasina returned to a fourth consecutive term in office. The United States, United Kingdom and the UN said the election process was not inclusive, while China, Russia, and India congratulated Hasina.

Protests that started in July over job quotas quickly spread with demands for an end to Hasina's repressive rule. The authorities imposed a nationwide internet shutdown, restricting access to information, and enforced a curfew with a "shoot-on-sight" order.

Nearly 1,000 people, including over 100 children, were reportedly killed in the violence in July and in reprisal violence after Hasina's ouster.

Despite the end of Hasina's rule, since August security forces in some cases returned to patterns of abuse that were familiar under her administration. These include arbitrarily arresting Awami League officials and supporters, as well as journalists seen to have been favorable to the previous government and filing criminal complaints against large numbers of "unknown" people.

## Attacks on Ethnic and Religious Minorities

Following Hasina's resignation, rioters attacked her supporters, including Hindus, Ahmadi Muslims, and ethnic minorities, resulting in violence that killed over 200 people. Criminals and opposition supporters attacked shops, homes and places of worship. Many Muslims protected minorities and criticized the attacks.

In September, violence broke out in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Believing that members of the Indigenous Jumma community had killed a Bengali settler, mobs attacked the ethnic minorities, and burned their properties. When Jumma youth protested, the military used live ammunition to disperse the gathering. At least four people were killed in the violence. Independent international human rights monitors and journalists continue to be denied access to the area.

## Enforced Disappearances and Torture

Although the Hasina administration had repeatedly denied enforced disappearances by security forces, three victims– Michael Chakma, Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem, and Abdullahil

Amaan Azmi – were released days after her departure. They said they were held in solitary confinement but could hear the screams as other detainees were tortured.

Odhikar, a prominent Bangladeshi human rights organization, estimates that over 700 people were forcibly disappeared under the Hasina government. While some were later released, produced in court, or said to have died during shootouts with security forces, nearly 100 people remain missing.

Allegations of torture continued to surface, including from students taken into custody during the protests. Historically, allegations of torture in Bangladesh have rarely been investigated or prosecuted.

## Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

While Bangladesh has made economic progress, the recent protests reflected frustration over uneven distribution of resources. The unemployment rate of young people aged 15-24 remains the highest in the region, and 42 percent among young women. Bangladesh has the biggest gender gap in youth unemployment globally. Cost of living, including food, reached its highest point in a decade, with little reprieve for those with low incomes.

## Freedom of Press and Expression

The Hasina administration targeted human rights activists, journalists, and political dissidents through arbitrary arrests and surveillance.

The Cyber Security Act (CSA), enacted in 2023, retains many of the abusive elements of its predecessor, the Digital Security Act, granting wide authority to officials to criminalize and jail political critics.

The interim government has committed to protecting free speech and welcomed criticism. However, as of October, authorities had filed cases against at least 129 journalists and scrapped nearly 200 press accreditations, underscoring the point that without systemic reform, the abusive practices will remain the same regardless of the change of government. In September, courts ordered police to investigate a man accused under the CSA for insulting Yunus and the Quran in a Facebook video.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

Despite the pivotal role that women played in the July uprising, they have not been adequately represented in the cabinet of the interim government. As set out in UN Security Council resolution 1325, women are entitled to full, equal, meaningful, and safe participation in all discussions about the country's future, including guiding the government's approach to transitional justice, legal reform, and institution-building.

Sexual and gender-based violence are widespread and women and girls in Bangladesh have little recourse to seek protection or access justice for these crimes.

A report released by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics found that rates of child marriage were on the rise, with 42 percent of girls in the country married before the age of 18, and 8 percent before age 15.

## Rohingya Refugees

There are nearly one million Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh. In September, Yunus reiterated his support for a mechanism that would hold the junta in Myanmar accountable for the abuses it has perpetrated against the Rohingya, adding that the international community must help to create conditions under which the Rohingya can return safely to Myanmar. The authorities have repeatedly stated that the country is unable to accept more refugees.

An increase in violence in Myanmar mid-year drove another 18,000 Rohingya refugees to seek asylum in Bangladesh, but security forces have pushed back thousands. Unregistered refugees risk hunger, and do not seek necessary healthcare out of fear that they will be returned. Bangladesh is bound by the customary international law prohibition on refoulement, and under the UN Convention Against Torture, to not forcibly return anyone to a place where they would face a real risk of persecution, torture, or other ill-treatment. Rohingya refugees in camps face precarious living conditions, including due to violence by armed groups and gangs in the camps. There is no criminal justice system available to refugees. Security forces have failed to address a culture of impunity surrounding sexual violence, where women and girls as well as LGBT refugees are often victims of attacks.

A fire at a refugee camp in January and heavy monsoon rains in July exacerbated the humanitarian crisis.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Same-sex conduct is criminalized in Bangladesh with penalties from ten years to life in prison. There are no legal protections against discrimination on the basis of sexuality. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people and advocates have reported increased threats of violence.

## Labor Rights

In January, garment factory workers, most of whom are women, blocked a highway to protest the failure of their employers to increase their wages according to a new government compensation scheme, but were dispersed by police firing tear gas.

In September, a garment worker was shot dead and at least 20 others were injured in violent clashes between workers demanding better wages and the police. The interim government committed to reviewing the minimum wage and to support workers amid the rising cost of living.

In September, an explosion on the oil tanker MT Suvarna Swarajya killed at least six workers, underscoring the failure of shipping companies to take adequate safety measures to protect their employees. The shipbreaking industry in Bangladesh is dangerous and underregulated, as many companies use loopholes to circumvent international labor and environmental regulations.

The authorities have yet to amend the labor laws to protect workers' freedom of association and collective bargaining in line with International Labour Organization (ILO)'s conventions and recommendations. The authorities also have not ratified the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention (C190), which requires comprehensive protections to end violence and harassment, including gender-based violence, at work.

# Belarus

Four years after mass protests swept the country following contested presidential elections in summer 2020, the government's far-reaching crackdown on peaceful protesters and critics continues to reach new heights.

International and Belarusian rights groups, as well as the UN human rights expert on Belarus, noted a continuously deteriorating human rights situation in 2024. In March, the UN Human Rights Office reported it had found "reasonable grounds to believe that the crime against humanity of persecution may have been committed" by officials.

## Torture and Ill-Treatment of Political Prisoners

Between July and December 2024, authorities released 237 political prisoners following presidential pardons. Many were forced under duress to sign an official plea for pardon, which includes admission of guilt.

Belarusian rights groups recorded scores of politically motivated trials in 2024. At time of writing, at least 1275 were behind bars on politically motivated charges. In July, UN experts called for the release of 63 older political prisoners.

Political prisoners continued to face ill-treatment and torture. At least seven, including Viktar Babaryka, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, and Ihar Losik, have been held incommunicado since February-April 2023.

Prison officials severely restricted political prisoners' access to correspondence, calls, parcels, and meetings with lawyers and family. Prisoners faced isolation in punishment cells and arbitrarily harsh confinement regimes. Dozens of political prisoners in 2024 faced new trumped-up "malicious disobedience" and other charges that prolonged their sentences.

Prison management denied political prisoners access to timely and appropriate health care. In 2024, at least three political prisoners, Aliaksandr Kulinich, Ihar Lednik, and Vadzim Khrasko, died preventable deaths after delayed or inadequate medical care. At

time of writing, local rights groups said that more than 224 political prisoners faced particularly high health risks due to poor conditions in Belarusian prisons.

In March, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women requested that Belarus take interim measures to protect political prisoner Palina Sharenda-Panasiuk, whose health had significantly deteriorated.

Law enforcement routinely forces detainees in politically motivated cases to "repent" their "crimes" on camera under duress and disseminates such videos online.

Belarusian authorities harass political prisoners upon their release by subjecting them to regular checks and opening new criminal cases.

## Retaliation against Family Members and Supporters

Belarusian authorities target family members of political prisoners and activists providing support to them.

In January, authorities labeled INeedHelpBY, a group organizing food aid for political prisoners and their families, as "extremist". As a result, law enforcement raided, detained, and questioned at least 287 recipients of food. More than 100 recipients faced administrative fines and arrests on charges of "receiving foreign aid for terrorist and extremist activities."

In June and July, law enforcement officers raided the homes of 21 exiled independent journalists and forced their family members to record videos condemning them.

Authorities also prosecuted dozens of people for "financing terrorism" and "extremism" following their donations to funds providing aid to political prisoners and civic resistance funds deemed "extremist" or "terrorist." Law enforcement officers forced many to pay bribes to avoid prosecution.

## Crackdown on Human Rights Defenders, Lawyers, and Journalists

In 2024, Belarusian authorities continued to arbitrarily detain rights defenders and journalists in retaliation for their work.

At least six rights defenders remained behind bars at time of writing, including Anastasia Lojka, Ales Bialiatski, Valiantsin Stefanovic, Uladzimir Labkovich, Marfa Rabkova, and Andrei Chapiuk. Bialiatski's health deteriorated in detention.

In May, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that human rights defender Ales Bialiatski had been arbitrarily detained and demanded his immediate and unconditional release.

At least 37 journalists and media workers were also behind bars at time of writing.

Lawyers representing clients in politically motivated cases or speaking out on rights abuses faced systematic and widespread repression. At time of writing, at least six human rights lawyers—Maksim Znak, Aliaksandr Danilevich, Vital Brahinets, Anastasiya Lazarenka, Yuliya Yurhilevich, and Aliaksei Barodka—were serving prison sentences on politically motivated charges ranging from six to ten years.

In December 2023, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that the arrests and subsequent imprisonment of human rights lawyer Vital Brahinets were arbitrary and based on his political opinion and status as a lawyer for the political opposition. The working group called for his immediate release.

Authorities in 2024 also continued arbitrarily blocking and labeling as "extremist" the websites and social media pages of independent media and human rights groups. In April, the Operation and Analysis Center controlled by the presidency adopted a directive, allowing the Operations and Analysis Center under the President of the Republic of Belarus to disconnect websites deemed "extremist" from the country's national domain system (.by), which effectively closes them.

By mid-November 2024, authorities had shut down almost 1,200 non-governmental organizations.

## Parliament Elections and Crackdown on Political Opposition

On February 25, 2024, elections to the House of Representatives (lower chamber of parliament) and local councils of deputies (local representative bodies) took place in

Belarus. “Human rights defenders for free elections” documented numerous violations of international standards on free and fair elections.

In November, law enforcement carried out more than 100 raids in connection with elections to the Coordination Council, a non-government body seeking a democratic transition in Belarus and presenting itself as a collective representative body of the democratic part of Belarusian society. Following the raids, authorities sentenced in absentia 20 activists, journalists, and academics for purported affiliation with opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. In May, when the election to the council took place, authorities also opened criminal cases against 257 people whose names were on the list of candidates.

## Politically Motivated Repression of Belarusians in Exile

In 2024, authorities prosecuted dozens of Belarusian exiles in absentia on politically motivated grounds, in violation of fair trial guarantees.

Authorities routinely checked the phones of Belarusians returning from abroad and increasingly detained people for following independent media labeled as “extremist,” having photos of the 2020 protests, or donating to funds deemed “extremist.”

## Crackdown on Individuals Opposing the War in Ukraine

Belarus has allowed Russian forces to use the country’s territory since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Open source data suggests Belarusian authorities have facilitated the illegal forcible transfers of over 2,000 Ukrainian children from Russia-occupied territories in Ukraine to Belarus.

In 2024, Belarusian authorities prosecuted individuals for expressing support for Ukraine, sharing photos of Russian troop movement with the media, or donating to the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment, a unit composed of Belarusians fighting for Ukraine.

## Death Penalty

Belarus remains the only country in Europe to carry out the death penalty.

In April, the UN Human Rights Committee found violations of the rights of Siamion Berazhny and Ihar Hershankou who were executed in 2018, including their right to a fair trial and right to life.

In June, the Minsk regional court sentenced to death German citizen Rico Krieger, convicted under six articles of the Criminal Code, including "terrorism," "extremism," and "rendering transport or communication routes unusable." On July 30, Lukashenka pardoned Krieger and two days later Krieger was released as a part of a major prisoner swap between Russia and the US and Germany.

In October, the Minsk regional court sentenced Alexander Taratuta, convicted of murder, to death.

## Migrants

As in recent years, migrants, including children, continued to be stuck on the Belarusian side of the border with Poland and faced serious abuses by Belarusian officials. Human rights organizations recorded deaths of migrants on both sides of the border.

## International Accountability

In September, Lithuania referred the situation in Belarus to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), who then opened a preliminary examination of the situation. In September, human rights groups submitted a new report to the ICC prosecutor alleging Belarus's involvement in displacement and indoctrination of Ukrainian children.

In April, the UN Human Rights Council established a Group of Independent Experts on the Human Rights Situation in Belarus to investigate and support accountability for international crimes committed by the Belarusian authorities. In the same resolution, the Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of its special rapporteur on Belarus.

In response to the ongoing internal repression, the EU and other key international actors adopted new rounds of sanctions against Belarusian authorities.

# Bosnia and Herzegovina

In March 2024, the European Council agreed to open EU accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The EU did not condition this decisive step on implementation of European Court of Human Rights rulings on discrimination against Jews, Roma, and others. BiH authorities made at best slow progress in tackling these and other rights challenges, including femicide and war crimes accountability.

## Discrimination and Intolerance

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in its 2024 review of Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed concern that displaced people and refugees returning to pre-war areas face hate speech, physical attacks, and employment discrimination. CERD also found persistent discrimination against Roma in employment, education, and access to public services, including obstacles to health care for women and girls.

Progress in hate crime trials is slow and convictions are rare. Of 19 ongoing trials in September, the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) recorded zero convictions. An OSCE study published in March found fears of reprisal, lack of trust in the justice system, and inadequate reporting mechanisms explain why many hate crimes go unreported.

## Disability Rights

An April BiH Ombudsman's report highlighted rights violations experienced by people with disabilities in institutions, including arbitrary restrictions on freedom of movement. Bosnia and Herzegovina has yet to harmonize laws affecting people with disabilities with relevant international treaties.

## Accountability for War Crimes

Progress towards prosecuting war crimes in local courts stagnated. In January, the BiH Council of Minsters extended until 2025 the deadline to implement the Revised National War Crimes Strategy.

According to the OSCE, as of September 2024, there were 226 cases pending before all courts in BiH. There were first-instance judgments in 11 cases during the first nine months of 2024, with 16 defendants found guilty and 8 acquitted. Final judgments were rendered in 14 cases during the same period, with 7 defendants found guilty.

As of September 2024, there were 53 ongoing cases involving conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), 3 with final judgments in which 4 defendants were found guilty on CRSV charges.

In May, amendments to the Federation BiH (FBiH) Law on the Protection of Civilian Victims of War granted special status to children born of wartime rape, giving them access to health care, education, employment, and housing. However, relevant laws had not harmonized across the country at time of writing. In January, the heads of the EU, Council of Europe, and OSCE in BiH called on Republika Srpska to end the practice of seeking court costs from victims whose request for compensation is denied.

A new history curriculum for elementary schools for the start of the 2024-25 school year in the Republika Srpska portrays Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic as heroes and omits their convictions for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

## Asylum Seekers and Migrants

Bosnia and Herzegovina accepted more than 4,200 "readmissions" of third-country nationals in 2023, including over 1,200 from Afghanistan, under a bilateral agreement with Croatia, according to March 2024 data. Bosnia and Herzegovina's asylum system is limited and largely ineffective and asylum seekers often face inadequate reception conditions, which can trigger involuntary returns.

## Gender-Based Violence, Including Domestic Violence

Gender-based violence, including against women with disabilities, is a serious concern. Cases of femicide in 2024 highlighted the authorities' failure to prevent and sanction violence even in cases in which the perpetrator has a known history of violence against the complainant.

BiH lacks national and entity-level laws criminalizing domestic violence. In June, the FBiH parliament adopted a four-year strategy on preventing and combating domestic violence, and a draft national law was pending at this writing. In Republika Srpska, a draft law on femicide was withdrawn because conservative activists took issue with the term "gender-based violence." The RS president tweeted support for the claims of protesting organizations that the law propagates "gender ideology," a politicized term often used to justify restrictions on the rights of women and LGBT people.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

While anti-LGBT attacks and discrimination persist across the country, the situation in Republika Srpska stands out. There has been no accountability for a 2023 March attack on activists in Banja Luka, and no official LGBT events have been held in Republika Srpska since the incident. The Republika Srpska government is seeking to remove existing references to gender identity from its criminal code.

BiH's first ever shelter for LGBT people opened in April where victims of hate attacks can stay temporarily and obtain psychological and legal support.

## Freedom of Media

Attacks on journalists and political pressure on independent media are common throughout the country. The BiH Constitutional Court in January 2024 struck down long criminal sentences for defamation contained in a Republika Srpska law but upheld the crime of defamation.

## Air Pollution and Human Rights

In July 2024, a court in Republika Srpska upheld for a fourth time the suspension of the environmental permit for construction of a new coal-fired power plant at the Ugljevik facility. Meanwhile, after a decade of activism, a coal-burning coke-production plant in Zenica was decommissioned in March 2024, improving air quality and reducing pollution levels.

# Brazil

The administration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva took important measures to reduce Amazon deforestation but is planning to invest billions of dollars in fossil fuels. There was devastating flooding in the south and a record drought nationwide that contributed to ravaging fires.

Police abuse continued to plague Brazil. In São Paulo state, there has been a dramatic increase in killings by police since the current governor took office in 2023.

Brazil made progress in the protection of children's digital rights.

## Democratic Rule

As of November, prosecutors had charged more than 1,600 people who allegedly supported or were part of a crowd that ransacked federal buildings in Brasília on January 8, 2023, calling for a coup. Of those, 284 had been convicted. Meanwhile, Congress was considering a bill to grant them amnesty.

In November, police accused former President Jair Bolsonaro and 36 others, including former ministers and military officers, of planning a coup. Police detained four military officers and a police officer for allegedly plotting to kill President Lula, Vice-President Geraldo Alckmin and Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes in 2022 to prevent Lula from taking office.

Also in November, a man detonated explosives and killed himself in front of the Supreme Court, after allegedly making threats against the Supreme Court.

Congress eliminated a requirement that parties allocate the same level of public electoral funds to Black and non-Black candidates. The parties also granted pardons to themselves after widely violating the allocation rule in the previous elections, in which several parties favored white candidates.

Researchers compiled 338 cases of threats and violence, including 33 killings, against individuals engaged in politics—or their relatives—in the run-up to October's municipal elections.

## Corruption and Transparency

Congress was considering a bill that would reduce the period politicians convicted of crimes are banned from running for office.

Federal police recommended charges against former President Bolsonaro in March based on allegations that he falsified health records, and in July that he appropriated jewelry received from foreign governments.

In May, prosecutors charged a member of Congress and his brother, a state official, with ordering the 2018 killing of councilwoman and human rights defender Marielle Franco, whom they allegedly saw as an "obstacle" to illegal activities, involving land-grabbing and paramilitary groups. Prosecutors also charged the then-civil police chief of Rio de Janeiro with aiding them. Franco's driver Anderson Gomes was also killed. In October, two former police officers who confessed to carrying out the murder were sentenced to decades in prison.

In August, the Supreme Court suspended budget allocations decided by lawmakers until Congress adopts rules to ensure greater transparency. In 2024, Congress controlled a quarter of all government discretionary spending, amounting to 49 billion reais (US$9 billion). The attorney general charged three Congress members with corruption over the use of those funds.

In 2023, the government denied 1,339 information requests, claiming that they contained personal data. It classified as confidential for 100 years the list of meetings by the first lady and a declaration of conflict of interest by a Cabinet member. In September, the government announced some measures to increase transparency.

## Freedom of Expression

A study identified more than 47,800 social media posts attacking the media during the electoral campaign.

In May, the Supreme Court ruled that campaigns to file multiple lawsuits against journalists in different jurisdictions constituted judicial harassment intended to silence them. It found that journalists are only liable for defamation if there is "unequivocal" evidence of malicious intent or "evident negligence" in their reporting.

## Digital Rights

In August, a Supreme Court justice suspended the operations of X in Brazil for more than five weeks after the social media platform refused to block accounts that likely engaged in doxing. The justice also ordered fines for users who accessed X through virtual private networks (VPNs). Lack of transparency about account removal orders by the Supreme Court and inadequate content moderation by X have harmed users.

In June, the personal photos of 358 Brazilian children were discovered to have been misused to build artificial intelligence (AI) tools that in turn were used by others to create malicious deepfakes of other children.

Between November 2023 and April 2024, at least 85 girls from six states told police that their social media photos had been manipulated, using AI, into sexually explicit deepfakes of them.

In June, the government committed to developing a national policy to protect the digital rights of children.

In July, the National Data Protection Authority prohibited Meta from using personal data from its child users to train its AI systems.

## Education

Racial disparities in access to education continued. Forty-eight percent of Black Brazilians aged 25 and older had completed secondary school in 2023, compared to 62 percent of white Brazilians of the same age.

In June, the government-supported National Observatory of Violence against Educators launched an initiative to research harassment against teachers who discuss gender and

sexuality, racism, and other topics in the classroom. In August, the government created a working group to address bullying, prejudice, and discrimination in schools.

## G20

In November, the G20 agreed to ensure that very wealthy individuals are effectively taxed by fighting tax evasion and fostering dialogue on tax issues, as proposed by Brazil. The G20 also endorsed Brazil's global alliance to fight hunger and poverty, which seeks to promote cash transfer programs and school meals, among other initiatives.

## Public Security and Police Conduct

Homicides fell by 5 percent from January through September, compared to the same period in 2023.

Police had killed 4,565 people as of September. Analysis from previous years showed that more than 80 percent of the people killed by police were Black. While some police killings are in self-defense, many result from illegal use of force.

In São Paulo, police killings increased 55 percent from January through September, compared to the same period in 2023. Police killed at least 84 people in two operations in the Baixada Santista region, in 2023 and 2024. Prosecutors had filed charges in just five killings, as of November.

Since a Supreme Court ruling in 2020 ordered Rio de Janeiro state to take measures to curb police abuse, killings have dropped dramatically. From January through September, they fell 24 percent, compared to the same period in 2023.

In June, the Supreme Court decriminalized marijuana possession for personal use. In response, Congress was considering a constitutional amendment to criminalize it. Brazilian police regularly use drug law enforcement as a justification for lethal raids into low-income neighborhoods.

In 2023, 118 police officers died of suicide, a 26 percent increase compared to 2022, the nonprofit Brazilian Forum of Public Security (FBSP) reported, exceeding the number of killings on duty (54) and off duty (73).

In two rulings published in March, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found police in São Paulo and Paraná states had committed serious human rights violations. The court ordered Brazil to stop trying crimes against civilians committed by military police in military courts, and instead use civilian courts.

In a report presented to the United Nations Human Rights Council in October, UN experts on racial justice and equality in law enforcement denounced systemic racism and urged Brazil to adopt a national strategy to reduce killings by police and ensure adequate investigations into police abuse cases.

## Detention Conditions

More than 668,500 people were incarcerated as of June 2024, exceeding the capacity of Brazilian facilities by 37 percent. Another 220,221 people were under house arrest.

The National Mechanism for the Prevention and Combat of Torture and the National Council of Justice reported overcrowding, unhealthy conditions, and ill-treatment and torture in at least six states in 2023.

The number of children and young people held in youth detention—11,757—continued to decline, dropping 6 percent in 2023 compared to 2022.

## Gender-Based Violence

About 3,060 women and girls were killed from January through September. Police registered about a third of them as femicide, defined under Brazilian law as killings "on account of being persons of the female sex."

There were about 51,400 reports of rapes of women and girls from January through September. In 2023, girls under 14 were victims of three-quarters of all reported rapes. Black girls were twice as likely to be victims of rape as white girls, a study found.

In a nationwide survey published in 2024, almost half of women said they had suffered domestic violence.

In September, President Lula fired the human rights minister after allegations that he had sexually harassed the racial equality minister and other women. He denied wrongdoing. Between January and August, ombudspersons' offices received 557 complaints of sexual harassment involving public servants.

## Abortion

Abortion is legal in Brazil only in cases of rape, to save a woman's life, or in cases of fetus anencephaly. Criminalization of abortion pushes women, girls and pregnant people out of the health system. People who have illegal abortions can face up to three years in prison, and those who perform them face up to four years in prison.

In June, thousands of people protested a bill that would make abortions after 22 weeks equivalent to homicide, even after rape.

## Military-Era Abuses

Since 2012, prosecutors have filed charges in more than 50 criminal cases for human rights abuses during Brazil's military rule (1964-1985). Courts have dismissed most, citing the statute of limitations or an amnesty law passed by the dictatorship and upheld by a 2010 Supreme Court ruling, which the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found violated international law.

In May, prosecutors charged four former officials and a medical examiner for the 1969 killing of Carlos Marighella, a former member of Congress who led armed opposition to the dictatorship, and its cover-up. Prosecutors also filed civil suits against more than 100 former officials for torture, disappearances, and killings.

In March, President Lula instructed his administration not to hold events in memory of the 60th anniversary of the coup. The UN special rapporteur on truth, justice and reparation said that silence "revictimizes" the victims.

The Lula administration apologized for abuses against Indigenous peoples during the dictatorship and re-established a commission to investigate killings and enforced disappearances that the Bolsonaro administration had dismantled.

## Rights of Indigenous People, Afro-Descendant People, and Environmental Defenders

The Lula administration has titled 13 Indigenous territories and made progress in the recognition of another 11, but hundreds of claims are still pending.

A key obstacle has been an attempt by agribusiness interests to deny Indigenous peoples' right to their traditional lands if they were not physically present on them when Brazil's Constitution was adopted in 1988. In 2023, the Supreme Court ruled that such a cut-off date was unconstitutional, but Congress passed it into law. The issue is pending before the court again.

Titling Indigenous lands is key to securing land rights and can curb deforestation. From 1985 to 2023, Indigenous territories lost less than 1 percent of their native vegetation, compared to 28 percent in private areas, MapBiomas, a consortium of scientists, reported.

In September 2024, the Lula administration issued 21 land titles to Afro-descendant rural communities. Yet, at the current pace, it would take 2,708 years for the government to conclude pending titling requests, a study by the non-profit Terra de Direitos showed.

People defending environmental and land rights continued to face violence.

The non-profit Pastoral Land Commission registered in the first half of 2024 more than 1,000 conflicts over land and resources across Brazil, many of them involving illegal logging, mining, or land-grabbing. These conflicts resulted in 11 killings, as of November.

As of November, Congress was considering approval of the Escazú Agreement, which requires protection of environmental defenders and access to information and public participation in environmental matters.

## Environment

Extreme weather events caused severe health and environmental impacts in Brazil. Experts said climate change increases the likelihood and intensity of such events.

Between April and May, more than 180 people died in the worst flooding in 80 years in Rio Grande do Sul state, which displaced tens of thousands.

Brazil as a whole suffered the worst drought on record. And fires raged across the country, many of them linked to clearing land for cattle grazing or agriculture, experts said. From January through October, more than 27 million hectares were burned, more than double the number of the previous year.

Brazil contributes to the climate crisis as one of the world's top 10 greenhouse gas emitters.

The Lula government has reduced deforestation, a key source of emissions. From August 2023 through July 2024, 6,288 square kilometers of Amazon rainforest were cleared, a 31 percent decrease compared to the same period in 2023.

In May, the agriculture ministry established a working group to design a system to track cattle, in response to a European Union law that restricts the sale of several products linked to deforestation, including meat and leather. Cattle ranching is the largest driver of deforestation in the Amazon.

In August, Brazil adopted a National Energy Transition Policy that experts said lacked concrete timelines and commitments. The Lula administration has planned 288 billion reais (US$47 billion) in investment in oil and gas, the vast majority public money, from 2023 through 2026 compared to just about 87 billion reais ($11 billion) in investment in renewable energy, all expected to come from the private sector. President Lula advocated for fossil fuel exploration.

In May, Congress overturned a presidential veto of a bill that granted the agriculture ministry the primary authority over pesticide regulation, reducing the role of health and environmental authorities. Pesticides cause severe health and environmental harm.

## Disability Rights

About 18.6 million adults and children over 2 years old with disabilities live in Brazil. Thousands are confined in institutions—sometimes for life—where some face neglect and abuse. The government launched a plan for people with disabilities, but failed to include concrete measures to foster deinstitutionalization.

Congress was discussing a bill to implement a care policy that includes support for people with disabilities.

## Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers

Thousands of Venezuelans have crossed the border into Brazil in recent years, fleeing hunger, lack of health care, or persecution.

About 568,000 Venezuelans lived in Brazil as of early June, of whom 23 percent had refugee status, and over 84 percent had residence permits. A voluntary relocation program benefited over 141,000 people as of October.

In August, the government prohibited people transiting without visas from applying for asylum, requiring them to continue to their destination or return to their home country.

# Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso's human rights situation deteriorated considerably in 2024, as deadly attacks by Islamist armed groups against civilians surged and military forces and pro-government militias committed abuses during counterinsurgency operations.

The United Nations Human Rights Chief expressed concerns over the rise in killings of civilians by armed groups and state actors.

An estimated 6,000 civilians died in conflict-related violence between January and August 2024 alone. By August, the conflict, that began in 2016, had forced over 2.3 million from their homes. 2.1 million people were displaced internally and over 200,000 to neighboring countries.

Burkina Faso's military junta, which took power during a 2022 coup, cracked down on media, the political opposition, and dissent, contributing to the shrinking of civic space.

In May 2023, Prime Minister Apollinaire Kyelem de Tambela announced the delay of elections scheduled for July 2024. On May 25, 2024, following nation-wide talks largely boycotted by the opposition, the junta announced that it would remain in power for another five years.

Military authorities clamped down on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people's rights. In July, the junta approved a revised family code criminalizing homosexuality. The revised code did not specify penalties.

On November 9, a government source told the media that Burkina Faso's junta planned to reinstate the death penalty, which was abolished in the 2018 penal code. The last known executions in Burkina Faso were in 1988.

On January 28, the junta announced it would leave the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), along with Mali and Niger, limiting opportunities for its citizens to seek justice through the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice.

On July 7, the military leaders of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger signed a treaty establishing the Confederation of the Sahel States, taking a mutual defense pact signed in September 2023 a step further.

## Abuses by Islamist Armed Groups

Islamist armed groups killed 1,004 civilians in 259 attacks between January and August 2024, compared to 1,185 civilians in 413 attacks in the same period in 2023, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED). Several attacks targeted communities that had joined the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie, VDPs), civilian auxiliaries of the Burkinabè armed forces. Islamist armed groups continued to besiege dozens of localities, cutting people off from food and aid.

On August 24, JNIM fighters attacked hundreds of civilians working on the construction of a defensive trench outside the town of Barsalogho, Center-North region, or who were nearby, killing at least 130 people, including dozens of women and children, and injuring at least 200 more.

On June 11, alleged JNIM fighters attacked Sindo town, Hauts-Bassins region, killing at least 20 civilian men. The attack was in apparent retaliation against the local community whom the JNIM accused of joining the VDPs.

On June 16, the JNIM claimed responsibility for a June 11 attack on an army base in Mansila, Sahel region, in which at least 20 civilians were killed and their homes burned.

On May 22, alleged JNIM fighters attacked a VDP base and a displaced persons' camp in Goubré, North region, killing at least 72 civilians. The attack was in apparent retaliation against villagers who refused to join JNIM ranks.

On March 29, 15 women were reported missing after they ventured outside the city of Djibo, Sahel region, to fetch firewood. Relatives of the missing women believed they were either killed or kidnapped by the JNIM.

Islamist armed groups also killed Christian worshippers who did not abandon their religion despite Islamist warnings.

On February 25, the ISGS killed at least 12 civilians in an attack on a Catholic church in Essakane village, Sahel region. On August 25, Islamist fighters killed at least 26 civilians in Sanaba village, in western Burkina Faso.

## Abuses by State Security Forces and Pro-Government Militias

Burkinabè military and VDPs killed at least 1,000 civilians between January and July 2024, according to ACLED, and forcibly disappeared dozens of others during counterinsurgency operations in 2024.

On February 25, the military summarily executed at least 223 civilians, including 56 children, in the villages of Nondin and Soro, North region, in apparent retaliation for an attack by Islamist fighters against a Burkinabè military camp outside Ouahigouya city. These mass killings appear to be part of a widespread military campaign against civilians accused of collaborating with Islamist armed groups and may amount to crimes against humanity.

Media reported that between April 27 and May 4, soldiers killed up to 400 civilians during counterinsurgency operations in 15 villages located along their itineraries.

A video circulated on social media in July 2024 and verified by Human Rights Watch shows 18 men, wearing Burkinabè army uniforms, standing by while two use knives to disembowel a dismembered human body.

## Crackdown on the Media and Dissent

The military junta has used a sweeping emergency law against journalists, critics, and judges.

Between August 9 and 12, the security forces notified seven judges and prosecutors that they had been conscripted to participate in military operations against Islamist armed groups, between August 14 and November 13. On August 14, six reported to a military base in Ouagadougou and have not been heard from since. All seven judicial officers had opened legal proceedings against junta supporters.

In February, armed men in civilian clothes abducted Rasmané Zinaba and Bassirou Badjo, members of the civil society group Balai Citoyen, in Ouagadougou, the capital.

In June and July, Zinaba and Badjo appeared in two videos posted on Burkina Faso's state TV YouTube channel, wearing military uniforms, and participating in military exercises, presumably in a conflict zone. In early November 2023, the Burkinabè security forces had notified a dozen journalists, activists, and political opponents , including Zinaba and Badjo, that they would be conscripted to participate in security operations. On December 6, 2023, a court in Ouagadougou ruled that the conscription orders concerning Zinaba and Badjo were illegal.

The military junta has also abducted civil society activists and political opponents.

In January, unidentified men, presenting themselves as members of the national intelligence services, abducted Guy Hervé Kam, a lawyer and coordinator of the political group Serve and Not be Served (Servir Et Non se Servir, SENS), inside Ouagadougou's international airport. Kam was released on May 29 after the Ouagadougou Court of Appeal ruled against his arrest, only to be re-arrested the following day on charges of "conspiracy," and remanded in a military prison. On July 9, a military court ordered Kam's release on bail. On July 31, a military prosecutor summoned Kam, ordered again his arrest for "attempt at destabilizing" the country, and remanded him in prison.

In June, Serge Oulon, director of the publication L'Événement, Kalifara Séré, commentator on the private television channel BFI, and Adama Bayala, also commentator on the same TV channel, all critics of the junta, were abducted by unidentified men and remain missing. In October, a member of the justice ministry stated that the three men had been conscripted.

## Accountability for Abuses

Successive Burkinabè governments have made scant progress in investigating those responsible for conflict-related atrocities since 2016.

On July 26, Human Rights Watch wrote to the Burkinabè justice minister, sharing the organization's research findings on the alleged abuses committed by armed Islamist

groups, and requesting responses to specific questions. In its response, the justice minister said that "all allegations of human rights … abuses committed by terrorists are subject to investigations aimed at … sanctioning perpetrators" and that "several judicial investigations have been initiated by military prosecutors or civilian courts."

In 2024, there was little progress in the investigations of several 2023 killings. On April 20, 2023, soldiers killed 83 men, 28 women, and 45 children and burned homes in and near the village of Karma, Yatenga province. Authorities announced an investigation but have not followed up. On November 12, 2023, the European Union called for an investigation into a massacre in the Centre-Nord region in which about 100 people were reportedly killed. The government said that on November 5, 2023, gunmen killed at least 70 people in Zaongo village and that the incident was being investigated.

# Burundi

Over the past year, the government continued to restrict space for civil society, independent media, and political opposition. Impunity for human rights violations persists, including for those who perpetrated abuses during the 2015 crisis, and is compounded by a deteriorating security situation. Cases of enforced disappearance and arbitrary arrest remain of concern in the context of the upcoming 2025 legislative and municipal elections.

The country is facing an unprecedented economic crisis, characterized by 26 percent inflation and over half of the population living in poverty, according to the United Nations. Burundians face shortages of fuel, water, and electricity outages, which have affected the delivery of public services essential to rights such as health care and education.

## Political Space

The ruling party, the National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD), continues to exercise control over institutions, the National Intelligence Service (SNR), and the Imbonerakure youth league, which is an auxiliary to local law enforcement and the military. The Imbonerakure continue to commit abuses against the population, taking part in beatings, harassment, arbitrary detention, and killings of people suspected of being opponents of the ruling party. In 2024, they contributed to military operations in South Kivu, in neighboring eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, and took part in trainings. The year was marked by an uptick in hate speech and inflammatory rhetoric, including at the highest political level.

A new electoral code was adopted in April, raising the cost of registering to stand for elections, including to up to 100 million Burundian Francs (approximately US$34,700) for presidential candidates. This risks hindering the ability of Burundians to contest elections. The new code also establishes that candidates leaving a political party must wait two years before they can run as independent candidates. This measure would prevent the only remaining opposition leader, Agathon Rwasa, who was ousted from the leadership of the opposition political party National Congress for Freedom (Congrès National pour la Liberté, CNL) in March 2024, from standing in the 2025 elections.

On January 17, the interior minister wrote to the CNL, accusing the party of collaborating with a terrorist organization and threatening "consequences." The CNL responded by informing the minister of its intention to hold an extraordinary convention on March 2, with the resolution of the party's internal crisis on the agenda. The minister recommended that the party review and implement the recommendations contained in its June 2023 letter before considering organizing a national convention. The general assembly voted to remove Rwasa.

## Media Freedom

Threats and repression against journalists and human rights defenders continued. An August presidential decree granted journalist Floriane Irangabiye a pardon, which resulted in her release two days later. However, another journalist, Sandra Muhoza, remains arbitrarily detained. On May 2, journalist Ahmadi Radjabu was arrested as he was recording footage of a fire at the Ruvumera market and detained for two weeks, according to media reports.

One of the last remaining independent papers in Burundi, *Iwacu Press*, received threats throughout the year. On June 5, two police officers attempted to detain Pascal Ntakirutimana, an *Iwacu Press* journalist, in Bujumbura, according to news reports and a report by the outlet. The next day, *Iwacu* received a letter from the media regulator, Conseil National pour la Communication (CNC), accusing the outlet of professional faults in its reporting.

The CNC banned the rebroadcasting of two episodes of Bonesha FM radio talk shows in June on the grounds that the guests had exaggerated, according to a national rights group. On May 22, a senior police officer assaulted *Iwacu* reporter Jean-Noël Manirakiza at a restaurant in the country's political capital, Gitega, according to *Iwacu* and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Blogger Kenny-Claude Nduwimana remains in detention at time of writing despite having already served over a year in prison since October 2023 after being given an eight month sentence.

The media law was revised for the fourth time since 2013, without significant consultation. Even though the updated law partially decriminalizes media offences, making some offences subject to fines rather than prison terms, it does not meet international human rights standards. The proposed fines can go up to 1.5 million Burundian francs ($520).

According to media reports, the CNC prevented four private radio stations from broadcasting a media discussion on the draft law, stating that it was not yet time to comment on a law that had not yet been promulgated by the president.

## Women and Children's Rights

The government has failed to act to prevent acts of gender-based violence, including child marriage; 19 percent of girls are married before age 18. In March and April 2024, the authorities, including the police and the Imbonerakure, harassed and evicted from their homes hundreds of cohabitating couples who are not legally married, according to media reports. They forced some women in these relationships to relocate to their parents' homes; some children were separated from their mothers and sent to live with the woman legally married to their father. They also coerced men into living with the women they were legally married to even if that relationship had long ended. The authorities claimed the actions were carried out in line with "moral and Christian order."

## Security and Regional Dynamics

Between December 2023 and February 2024, at least 28 people —including 11 children— were killed in two attacks, in border areas of Western Burundi. The RED-Tabara armed group (Resistance Movement for the Rule of Law-Tabara, Mouvement de la résistance pour un État de droit-Tabara) claimed responsibility for both attacks, but victim and witness accounts provided contradictory information to Human Rights Watch about the December Vugizo attack, and who was responsible for the killings. Armed assailants believed to belong to the RED-Tabara armed group killed residents, including women, during the second attack in February 2024, in Buringa, Bubanza province. Both villages are near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the armed group is based.

In April and May, there were at least three grenade explosions in Bujumbura, injuring at least 38 people, according to media reports. Pierre Nkurikiye, the Ministry of Security's spokesman told reporters that six people had been arrested, and blamed RED-Tabara and Rwanda for carrying out the attacks. In a statement, the Rwandan government said it had no reason to engage in these activities. On May 12, RED-Tabara rejected the accusations.

These attacks have led to an escalation in tensions in the Great Lakes region. Following the December killings, Burundi's president Évariste Ndayishimiye announced he was suspending diplomatic ties with Rwanda, closing their border, and would begin deporting Rwandan citizens, claiming it was in response to Rwanda's alleged support for RED-Tabara. Rwanda denied the allegations.

The presence of troops from Burundi in operations against the M23 and Rwandan army has exacerbated tensions between Rwanda and Burundi.

## Oversight, Justice, and Accountability

The UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution renewing the mandate of the special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Burundi. Burundi continues to completely disregard its obligations as a member of the Council, including by denying the special rapporteur access to the country.

The National Independent Human Rights Commission's (CNIDH) lack of independence means that there is no national mechanism able or willing to protect human rights. In June, the Global Alliance for National Human Rights Institutions recommended that the CNIDH be downgraded from A to B status, due to its lack of independent monitoring and reporting on politically sensitive cases.

The International Criminal Court's investigation into the situation in Burundi, which focuses on alleged crimes against humanity committed in Burundi between 2015 and 2017, continued.

In August, survivors and relatives of victims of a 2004 attack on the Gatumba refugee camp near Bujumbura, filed criminal cases against alleged perpetrators in their home countries of Burundi, Rwanda, and DR Congo. The complaints allege genocide and crimes against humanity.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Burundi's penal code, under article 590, punishes same-sex relations with up to two years' imprisonment. In December 2023, Ndayishimiye incited violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, calling for them to be stoned.

# Cambodia

In 2023, Hun Sen, who had been prime minister since 1985, handed over the premiership to his son Hun Manet. Cambodia remains a single-party state with fixed and controlled elections, with the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) controlling all state institutions, including the judiciary. The Cambodian government continues to harass and prosecute critics of the government, including those outside the country. It also tightly restricts the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly.

## Flawed Elections

In the run-up to the February Senate elections, Cambodian authorities in January arrested four opposition officials and members. Opposition politicians reported intimidation and threats plus bribes and other unlawful inducements from government officials to withhold their support from opposition candidates. Following the elections, the Senate voted to approve Hun Sen, who remains CPP head, to be Senate president.

In April, the authorities arrested six opposition activists on baseless charges related to the preparation of candidate lists for Cambodia's May local elections. Rong Chhun, an adviser to the National Power Party, is facing up to six years in prison if convicted on politically motivated charges.

## No Reform

Prime Minister Hun Manet had promised to strengthen democracy and rule of law, yet his government has tightened restrictions on fundamental freedoms, intensified persecution of dissidents, and increased criminal penalties for peaceful dissent in 2024.

In May, Cambodia appeared before the Human Rights Council in Geneva for its fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Since its last review in 2019, the government has failed to make progress on the recommendations it accepted. Instead, Cambodian authorities continued to harass critics, including in the months leading up to the UN review.

In his July end of mission statement, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia noted that the government did not accept many of the most needed areas for reform recommended during the UPR, "especially to open up civic and political space and release political/human rights detainees."

## Threats and Arrests Against Opposition

Authorities continued to target opposition politicians and dissidents both inside Cambodia and in Thailand for advocating for human rights and democracy. On several occasions, Hun Sen issued public threats against the CPP's critics.

In January, the Phnom Penh Appeal Court denied opposition leader Kem Sokha's request to review the terms of his home detention at the start of his appeal against his treason conviction. Prior to his conviction in 2023, Sokha was held in pretrial detention for two years, which the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention declared was "arbitrary" and "politically motivated." A group of UN human rights experts also stated that they "have strong grounds to believe that the treason charge against Mr. Sokha is politically motivated." Sokha's appeal was still pending at time of writing.

Since May, at least 11 notable opposition party members from all three main opposition political parties have been charged, convicted, or had their convictions upheld on politically motivated grounds, including Sun Chanthy, Phou Sovantha, Seam Pluk, Teav Vannol, Ouk Sovanchhorn, Tok Dara, Boun Sarom Chaem Savoeun, Thach Setha, Mer Seng Hor, and Rong Chhun.

In February, Thai police arrested three opposition activists in Bangkok—Chorn Sokoeurn, Chorn Chany, and Pheap Chan Sophen—ahead of Hun Manet's visit to Thailand. Hun Manet expressed his gratitude to then Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin for his commitment not to allow people to perpetrate "harmful activities" against neighboring countries.

The same month, Thai authorities detained three former Candlelight party members—Kung Raiya, Phorn Phanna, and Loem Sokha—who had fled to Thailand for fear of political persecution. The Cambodian government has repeatedly attempted to silence and intimidate exiled critics and dissidents in countries such as Thailand and Japan.

## Harassment and Targeting of Trade Union Leaders and Labor Activists

Cambodian government-aligned unions began harassing and threatening legal action against the labor rights organization Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL) and its leadership following the group's report on freedom of association violations in Cambodia. In September, 18 apparel, footwear, and travel brands sourcing from Cambodia issued a statement urging the Cambodian government in "the strongest possible terms" to immediately cancel the audit of CENTRAL led by the Ministry of Interior.

Chhim Sithar, president of the Labor Rights Supported Union of Khmer Employees of NagaWorld, was released from prison in September after completing her full two-year sentence on charges of incitement. The politically motivated charges arose directly from Sithar and her union's work defending workers' rights.

## Restrictions on Freedom of Expression and Media

The authorities arbitrarily arrested at least 94 people since late July for publicly criticizing the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area (CLV), a development plan by the three countries established in 2004 to facilitate cooperation on trade and migration. At least 59 of those arrested remain unlawfully detained and wrongfully charged for peacefully expressing their views.

In September, UN experts called for the suspension of Cambodia's newly issued Charter for Professional Journalism and raised concerns about the scope of its application, stating that the charter fails to provide remedies for when media makes factual errors. The charter also includes vague clauses that can be utilized to further unjustly stifle freedom of expression and critical journalism by media in the country.

In September, Cambodian authorities arrested and charged Mech Dara, an award-winning journalist, in an apparent reprisal for his investigative reporting on government officials' involvement in human trafficking and cybercrimes. He was later released on bail following international outrage regarding his case, but only after making an apparently forced confession admitting to his alleged crimes.

## Indigenous Rights and Environmental Defenders

Indigenous communities in Cambodia struggle to be recognized and gain communal land titles due to an onerous and complex process under Cambodian law.

The Cambodian government and Wildlife Alliance, who have been jointly carrying out a major carbon-offsetting project in Cambodia, did not adequately consult with Indigenous communities resulting in their harassment, arrest, and jail time for foraging or farming in "protected" areas. To date, no binding benefit-sharing agreement has been signed with communities.

Predatory lending practices within Cambodia's microfinance sector have also harmed Indigenous peoples, by targeting their land for profit. The International Finance Corporation's (IFC) Compliance Advisor/Ombudsman office found in its appraisal of microfinance lenders in Cambodia that there were "preliminary indications of harm" to borrowers and violations of IFC performance standards, including their impacts on Indigenous communities, such as reduced consumption of food, forced land sales, child labor, and debt-related suicides.

In July, the Phnom Penh Capital Court convicted 10 activists from Mother Nature, an award-winning, youth-led Cambodian environmental group. The activists face between six to eight years in prison for their peaceful efforts to protect Cambodia's environment. In June, a court upheld the conviction of an environmental activist and human rights defender for defamation, insult, and incitement to commit a felony.

## Online Scam Centers

According to the UN human rights office, online scam centers that enslave at least 100,000 people in Cambodia continue to operate with impunity, despite government claims that officials have raided suspected locations. In September, the US government announced sanctions on Cambodian tycoon Ly Yong Phat, his conglomerate L.Y.P. Group Co., O-Smach Resort, and three hotels owned or controlled by Ly for their role in serious human rights abuses related to forced labor and scam operations.

# Canada

The government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, which passed its 10-year mark in office in 2024, has made progress in advancing human rights at home and abroad in some areas but continues to fall short in others. Ongoing concerns include systemic racism and abuses against Indigenous peoples, the impacts of climate change, and transnational repression by third countries that threaten diaspora communities.

## Indigenous Peoples' Rights

In a landmark ruling in July, the Supreme Court of Canada found both the federal and provincial government in breach of a 174-year-old agreement with several First Nations in Ontario, depriving generations of Indigenous people fair compensation for their resources.

In a report in March, the Auditor General of Canada detailed government failures to address service gaps in First Nations and Inuit-led policing programs and funding shortfalls in First Nations housing.

In June, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) released a progress report on the fifth anniversary of the release of the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The report found that only two of the inquiry's 231 recommendations had been fully implemented, with most showing limited or no progress.

In its 2024 budget, the Trudeau government pledged an additional US$6.6 (CDN$9) billion in funding for Indigenous communities over the next five years to support child and family services, health, education, housing, and community infrastructure. However, in a report released in April, the AFN estimated the cost of closing the infrastructure gap between First Nations and non-Indigenous communities at nearly US $254 (CDN$350) billion, encompassing housing, schools, water plants, roads, and other infrastructure.

In April, following a visit to Canada, the UN special rapporteur on the right to water and sanitation urged the government to address discrimination against, and marginalization of, Indigenous communities by addressing water advisories (indicating drinking water is unsafe), toxic contamination, and the criminalization of water defenders.

After its visit in May, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, despite acknowledging the positive systems in place to avoid arbitrary detention, expressed concerns about "disproportionately high rates of Indigenous Peoples in criminal justice detention" in Canada.

In October, Canada was reviewed by the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms Against Women. The Committee reported a lack of effective involvement of Indigenous women in the development of gender equality policies, significant barriers to participation in public life, persistent harmful stereotypes and practices, and an increase in the number of cases of gender-based violence, particularly affecting Indigenous women.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights held a public hearing in July with members of the Grassy Narrows First Nation in Ontario calling for justice and reparations for decades of mercury poisoning that contaminated the community's watershed and fisheries.

## Environment and Human Rights

In June 2024, the Trudeau government adopted a long-awaited law that obligates the federal government to develop a national strategy to prevent and address the effects of environmental racism.

Canada experiences widespread impacts from global warming, including more frequent severe heat waves and a shrinking of ice cover in the Arctic. Driven by hot and dry weather, the huge forest fires that ripped through Canada in 2023 were followed by another year of above-normal burning, with more than 5 million hectares up in flames in 2024.

Canada remains one of the world's largest per capita greenhouse gas emitters, contributing to the climate crisis and its growing toll around the globe. Extraction of oil from the massive Canadian oil sands is among the most carbon-intensive and polluting oil production methods in the world. Federal and provincial support for increasing fossil fuel production disregards the human rights obligation to adopt and implement robust climate mitigation policies. In August, the Trudeau government announced the launch of a 10-year study to research the long-term health and environmental impacts of potential contaminants from oil sands operations in the province of Alberta.

Some expansion of oil and gas production faces significant resistance, including where it is transported across First Nations' lands. For example, hereditary chiefs of the Indigenous Wet'suwet'en Nation have long opposed the construction of a natural gas pipeline through their land in central British Columbia. In July 2024, Chief Dsta'hyl of the Wet'suwet'en Nation became the first person in Canada to be designated by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience after he was sentenced to 60 days' house arrest after being convicted of criminal contempt while peacefully protesting the construction of the Coastal GasLink pipeline.

## Transnational Repression

In May, a public inquiry into foreign interference in Canadian elections released an initial report that found that foreign interference undermined the right of voters to have an electoral process "free from coercion or covert influence." Following the release of the report, new legislation (Bill C-70) was proposed, creating a mandatory registry for people undertaking "influence activity" on behalf of foreign states and giving the Canadian Security Intelligence Service expanded powers to address threats. In June, the Senate passed Bill C-70 without amendment, despite concerns by civil liberties groups that several of the bill's provisions would "significantly impact the rights and liberties of people in Canada."

The inquiry found that "while all Canadians are victims of foreign interference, the impacts of the latter are more present within some diaspora communities." Representatives of Chinese, Russian, Iranian, Sikh, and Uyghur diaspora communities in Canada with firsthand experience with transnational repression testified at the public inquiry. In May, following the government's announcement of Bill C-70, diaspora groups said the government's proposed foreign influence registry is a long-overdue step toward addressing their communities' concerns.

## Corporate Accountability

The Trudeau government has taken steps to address impunity for abuses by Canadian companies overseas but has yet to pass mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence legislation. The Trudeau government recommitted in its 2024 budget to introduce

legislation to eliminate forced labor from Canadian supply chains and tighten the import ban on products manufactured with forced labor.

The Canadian Network on Corporate Accountability urged the government to ensure that this legislation requires companies to exercise due diligence to prevent human rights abuses, empower affected communities to access remedies in Canadian courts, and apply to the full range of human rights. The passage of Bill S-211, which entered into force in January 2024, only obligates the government to set up a mandatory reporting system for Canadian companies and government bodies to report publicly on forced labor in their supply chains.

In response to a parliamentary report on the impact of mining on the environment and human rights, the government announced in February that it would assess the "effectiveness and progress to date" of the Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise (CORE). In March, the CORE released its first final report since the office began receiving complaints in 2021 against Canadian extractive and apparel companies.

During a visit to Canada in July, the UN special rapporteur on human rights defenders urged the Trudeau government to strengthen regulation and oversight of Canadian extractive companies operating abroad. She also critiqued the federal government for failing to ensure that the CORE had strong investigative powers.

In his report to the UN Human Rights Council in July, the UN special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery concluded that Canada's temporary foreign worker program is rife with abuses and is a breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery.

## Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants

People in immigration detention, including people with disabilities and those seeking refugee protection, continue to be regularly handcuffed and shackled in Canada. With no time limits on immigration detention, they can be detained for months or years, including in solitary confinement.

The Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) remains the only major law enforcement agency in Canada without independent civilian oversight. The federal government has

introduced oversight legislation, but it has yet to pass. CBSA's unchecked exercise of its broad mandate and enforcement powers has repeatedly resulted in serious human rights violations in the context of immigration detention, including prolonged solitary confinement in maximum-security jails, child detention and family separation, indefinite detention, and the stripping of legal capacity of people with mental health conditions.

CBSA has traditionally had broad latitude to place people in immigrant holding centers, provincial jails, or other detention facilities. In a major victory for migrant and refugee rights in March, all 10 of Canada's provinces committed to ending their immigration detention agreements and arrangements with the federal government. This means CBSA will no longer have the power to detain refugee claimants and migrants in provincial jails solely on immigration grounds. In response, the federal government passed legislation to expand immigration detention into federal prisons.

The Canadian government also struggled in 2024 to implement new resettlement programs aimed at providing safe haven for people fleeing conflict who have family ties to Canada. Lengthy processing times, financial barriers, and physical hurdles to completing mandatory biometric screening in neighboring countries often resulted in significant delays. A family reunification program launched in February to allow Canadian citizens and permanent residents to sponsor relatives from Sudan had failed to admit a single person as of October.

As of September, only about 200 Palestinians had arrived in Canada through a special visa program launched in January; most had to pay exorbitant fees to cross into Egypt before making it to Canada. In May, the government announced that it would increase the heavily criticized temporary visa cap for Palestinians from 1,000 to 5,000. The resettlement cap and visa form unique to Palestinians was critiqued by civil society organizations as discriminatory, the latter for including questions about the applicant's injuries and scars, social media accounts, employment history since the age of 16, and information on all in-law family members.

## Counterterrorism

Canada again failed in 2024 to take adequate steps to assist and repatriate Canadian men, women, and children unlawfully detained in northeast Syria in locked desert camps

and prisons for Islamic State (ISIS) suspects and their families. At this writing, at least 20 Canadians remained there, none of whom had been charged with a crime or brought before a judge to review the legality and necessity of their detention, making their detention both arbitrary and unlawful.

In May, Global Affairs Canada announced that six Canadian children were repatriated from camps in northeast Syria. According to the family's lawyer, however, their mother was left behind after failing to pass a security screening.

To date, Canada has not repatriated any of the detained Canadian men in Syria, some of whom have been held for over seven years, in dire and life-threatening conditions. In March, four Canadian men urged the Supreme Court to reconsider its 2023 decision not to hear their case challenging a federal court of appeals ruling that absolved the government of any obligation to repatriate them.

# Central African Republic

Fighting between the national army, alongside Russian mercenaries and Rwandan forces, and elements of the Coalition of Patriots for Change (Coalition des patriotes pour le changement, CPC) continued outside of major towns across the country. Civilians continue to be targeted and violence, while decreased, affected half of the population (2.8 million people) that require direct humanitarian assistance, including 1.3 million children. According to the United Nations, seven out of ten children do not attend school regularly, and around 1.2 million children are facing difficulties accessing education.

Security conditions hampered the delivery of humanitarian relief, especially in the eastern part of the country.

Mercenaries from Wagner, a Russian state-funded private military company, are deployed in the country. The UN reported several instances in which Wagner mercenaries participated in active fighting and were implicated in serious human rights abuses.

## Civic, Political, and Media Space

Political space is increasingly restricted after a 2023 constitutional referendum removed term limits for the president, Faustin-Archange Touadéra. Political opponents were targeted in 2024 in the aftermath of the referendum campaign, which saw crackdowns on civil society, the media, and opposition political parties. Local elections, originally slated for October 2024 and the country's first in over 36 years, were delayed until at least April 2025 due to lack of funding. The presidential vote is also due in 2025. The main opposition coalition has announced it will boycott the local and presidential elections without meaningful reform.

## Security Conditions

The country remained dangerous for humanitarian actors, with 97 incidents ranging from harassment to armed robberies of humanitarian actors registered between January and August.

A UN Security Council arms embargo, imposed on the country since 2013, was lifted in July.

The UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSCA, deployed 13,394 military peacekeepers and 2,415 police across many parts of the country. Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the mission is authorized to take all necessary means to protect the civilian population from threat of physical violence and to "implement a mission-wide protection strategy." In November 2023, the UN Security Council extended the mandate of the mission for another year. In September, the government signed a "handover protocol" with the UN to transfer children associated with armed forces and groups to civilian authorities.

Both the Azande Ani Kpi Gbe, a Zandé-based ethnic militia based in the southeast, and the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique, UPC), a member of the CPC coalition, targeted civilians in the southeast border region. The Azande Ani Kpi Gbe specifically targeted Muslims presumed to be sympathetic to the UPC.

The armed group Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation, or 3R, launched attacks on civilians outside of towns along the northwest border with Cameroon. In July, the group killed at least a dozen outside of Bocaranga. In April, the group executed at least 16 farmers outside of Bohong.

A report by the National Commission on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Commission nationale des droits de l'homme et des libertés fondamentales), stated that in February Russian forces fired at inmates at a prison in Bambari, killing two inmates and injuring two others.

An attack on a gold mine in Koki in October 2023, allegedly by Wagner mercenaries, killed at least a dozen miners, and has yet to be investigated.

## Justice for Serious Crimes

In September, the Special Criminal Court (SCC)—a war crimes court that is part of the domestic justice system but has both national and international staff and benefits from extensive UN and other international assistance—arrested and charged Abakar Zakaria Hamid, known as "SG," a former Seleka leader, for alleged crimes against humanity and war crimes linked to the 2014 attack at the Notre-Dame church, which had been serving as a displacement camp in Bangui, the capital. Hamid joined seven other individuals who had already been arrested and charged in relation to this case.

Investigating judges at the SCC in September referred the case against Bozizé, Eugène Barret Ngaïkosset, Vianney Semndiro, and Firmin Junior Danboy to the court's trial chamber. Ngaïkosset, Semndiro, and Danboy were in pretrial detention through 2024 and appealed the referral. Bozizé, who first fled in 2013, returned to the country in 2019 and emerged as a key leader of the CPC before going back into hiding in Guinea-Bissau, where he remains. According to the rules of the SCC, he can be tried in absentia.

In July, the SCC arrested three suspects, Yvon Nzelété, Narcisse Christian Gomani Niakari, and Roger Linet for alleged crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in the Mboumou province in 2017. In September, the court extended by one year the pretrial detention of Abdoulaye Hissène, who was arrested in 2023 in relation to the same case. He appealed the decision.

In June, the SCC arrested a former anti-balaka leader, Edmond Beïna, on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes allegedly committed in 2014 in Guen, Gadzi, and Djomo, in the Mambéré-Kadéï province in the southwestern part of the country. Beïna is accused with a fellow armed group leader, Maturin Kombo, who was arrested in 2022, and three other co-accused who were charged with crimes arising out of the same facts. In November the International Criminal Court (ICC) made public that it also issued an arrest warrant for Beïna in 2018. Central African authorities have challenged the admissibility of the case before the ICC.

Also in June, the court started its third trial, which relates to crimes allegedly committed by the Popular Front for the Renaissance of the Central African Republic (Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique, FPRC), in 2020 in the town of Ndélé.

In April, the SCC issued an arrest warrant for former president François Bozizé. He is charged with crimes against humanity allegedly committed between 2009 and 2013, by the Presidential Guard and other security services at the Bossembélé military training center. The center was known as "Guantanamo," and lies north of capital Bangui.

At the ICC, the separate trials of Seleka commander Mahamat Said Abdel Kani, accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Bangui in 2013, and anti-balaka leaders Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona and Alfred Yékatom, both charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity committed between in 2013 and 2014, continued.

In September, ICC judges held a hearing to assess potential compensation for Maxime Mokom, a former military coordinator of a group of anti-balaka militia. Mokom was released by the ICC in October 2023 after the court's prosecutor withdrew charges against him, citing a lack of evidence and difficulty in securing witnesses.

In April, Dieudonné Ndomaté, an anti-balaka leader and former tourism minister, was arrested in Cameroon and extradited to the Central African Republic where he awaits trial before a domestic criminal court.

## Displacement and Humanitarian Needs

The civilian population continued to pay a heavy price for violence in 2024. The total number of displaced people remained high because of fighting. Over 1.2 million Central Africans, according to the UN, were either refugees in neighboring countries (750, 000) or internally displaced (451,000) as of June. Conditions for internally displaced people and refugees, many of whom stay in camps, are inadequate. As of September 2024, over 29,000 Sudanese refugees had fled into the Central African Republic since the outbreak of Sudan's conflict in April 2023. Assistance to internally displaced people was seriously hampered by attacks on humanitarians and general insecurity in the country.

About 2.8 million people, out of a population of 6.1 million, needed humanitarian assistance. The humanitarian response plan was underfunded, with a budget gap of about US$175 million as of September.

# Chad

Impunity for human rights violations has been a hallmark of the regime of Gen. Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno, who seized power and declared himself head of the Transitional Military Council (Conseil Militaire de Transition, CMT) following the 2021 death of his father. Following a constitutional referendum, which helped solidify his rule, Déby in May won a presidential election marred by allegations of irregularities and violence.

To date, there has been no accountability for the October 20, 2022 violent crackdown on protesters in several cities across the country, that resulted in the killing of scores of people, and injury to many more. An amnesty law removed the possibility of prosecuting perpetrators of abuses related to the October protests. In addition, there was no accountability for the deaths in detention, torture, and inhumane treatment of protesters from October 20 held at Koro Toro, a maximum-security prison in the north.

## End of Political Transition

Interim president Déby won a presidential election in May. Some international organizations, including the International Organization of la Francophonie (Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, OIF), attempted to observe the election, but lacked the capacity to comprehensively monitor the election across the entire country. The interim government denied national civil society organizations funded by the European Union the accreditation to monitor the election.

Déby's main challenger, former prime minister Succès Masra, who officially won 18.53 percent, disputed the results and declared himself winner. He has since reported threats against himself and his supporters.

After the announcement of the provisional results of the presidential vote, security forces celebrated Déby's victory by firing their weapons over cities and towns across the country, killing at least 11 and injuring hundreds. To date there has been no investigation into the security forces' actions.

## Political Violence

In February, members of the security forces killed Yaya Dillo, president of the Socialist Party Without Borders (Parti socialiste sans frontières, PSF), during an attack on the party's headquarters in N'Djamena, the capital. Dillo was considered a leading political opponent of Déby and the two men were reported to be cousins from the same Zaghawa ethnic group. The government alleged that PSF members attacked an office of the national security agency, which responded by attacking the party headquarters on February 28. Dillo, according to the state prosecutor, was killed during an exchange of gunfire with security forces. Reuters, following an investigation, reported that Dillo was most likely killed with a bullet to the side of the head at close range.

## Aftermath of the October 20, 2022 Protests

An amnesty law passed by a national transitional council in November 2023 removed the possibility of prosecuting security forces for their violent repression during the 2022 demonstrations, organized by civil society and opposition parties. The law denies victims the right to seek justice and reinforces impunity.

The outcome of an investigation into the violence by the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) was not published.

In August, Human Rights Watch released a report detailing how the military was responsible for the deaths in custody of several protesters en route to and at Koro Toro prison in October 2022. The prisoners were unlawfully detained, mistreated, and denied basic supplies during the two to three days transit from the capital city to the prison. The government denied the abuses documented in the report.

In February, prominent rights defender, Mahamat Nour Ahmat Ibédou, was removed from his post as president of the National Human Rights Commission (Commission nationale des droits de l'homme, CNDH). Under his tenure, the CNDH was the only government body which published in 2023 an independent report on the government's actions during the 2022 protests and recommended that those responsible for violations be prosecuted. Ibédou came under pressure soon after the report's publication.

## Justice, Reparations for Hissène Habré's Victims

Limited compensation was paid out to victims of former President Hissène Habré, who died of Covid-19 in August 2021 while serving a life sentence. Habré had been convicted of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and torture, including sexual violence and rape, by the Extraordinary African Chambers in the Senegalese court system on May 30, 2016.

In February, following a meeting between President Déby and three Chadian victims' associations, the government began making payments of US$16.5 million (10 billion CFA francs) to 10,700 victims, including prison survivors and families of those who were killed under Habré, who will each receive 925,000 CFA ($1,529). This is less than 10 percent of what courts in Senegal and Chad had awarded. The victims' associations welcomed the payments but insisted on their right to more complete compensation.

In October, police forcibly cancelled a conference in N'Djamena that was planned to discuss justice for the victims of Habré abuses. A former Human Rights Watch counsel, who was to be a keynote speaker at the conference, was briefly detained at the police intelligence office, the Directorate General for Intelligence and Investigation (Direction générale du renseignement et de l'investigation), and then expelled.

## Intercommunal Violence in the South and East

Violent clashes, attributed to conflicts between herders and sedentary farmers, decreased slightly in 2024, based on reports from local non-governmental organizations, but nonetheless continued in the south and east.

In February, at least 42 people were killed in clashes between rival communities in the east. In March, at least 23 people from three villages in the Moyen-Chari province were killed over the course of six days. Over 100 homes were also set ablaze. The number of those who died in these clashes was likely underreported. A United Nations report from May highlighted scores of deaths that had yet to be documented in two departments in the Moyen-Chari province alone.

## Displacement

Fighting in Sudan, which started in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), triggered massive displacement of people into Chad. As of September, over 650,000 Sudanese refugees had fled to Chad, joining an estimated 530,000 refugees and asylum seekers already in the country. This strained an already underfunded humanitarian response, especially as floods continued to ravage the country.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Article 354 of the 2017 Penal Code prohibits "sexual relations with a person of one's own sex." Under the code, individuals convicted of same-sex relations face up to 2 years' imprisonment and a fine of between 50,000 to 500,000 CFA francs (approximately US$75-750).

# China

Over a decade into President Xi Jinping's rule, efforts to centralize control has led to heightened repression throughout the country. There is no independent civil society, no freedom of expression, association, assembly or religion, and human rights defenders and other perceived critics of the government are persecuted. The government considers the culturally and ethnically distinct Tibetans and Uyghurs as threats and subjects them to particularly harsh repression. Hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs remain imprisoned as part of the government's crimes against humanity in the region. It has also ended long-protected civil liberties in Hong Kong. While foreign governments recognize the Chinese government's worsening rights record, they have not confronted Beijing.

## Freedom of Expression

The Chinese government controls all major channels of information, such as television, radio, and print publications. Its "Great Firewall" blocks people in China from accessing information commonly available on the internet. It also imposes ideological control over the education system.

While most people in China habitually self-censor, some stories—those that do not challenge the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy—occasionally reach the broader public. A Chinese media outlet's investigative report on cooking oil contamination in July and Chinese lawyer Yi Shenghua's post in August exposing an illegal human remains trade attracted widespread public attention. They were followed swiftly by official censorship and punishments.

There were numerous instances of censorship throughout the year. In January, Shanghai police arrested filmmaker Chen Pinlin ("Plato") for a documentary about the 2022 White Paper protests.

Authorities continued to update the country's censorship and surveillance regime to tighten control. In February, the State Secrets Law was revised and implementing regulations were published in July, expanding the law's already overly broad scope. In July, the government proposed a new national digital ID card system. The cards, which are

ostensibly voluntary, would give state agencies even more ability to track people online and offline.

Previously tolerated topics have become off-limits. With the Chinese economy faltering, the government has prohibited discussions of its economic policies and penalized those critical of them. In September, a top Chinese Academy of Social Sciences economist went missing after he disparaged President Xi's economic policies in a private WeChat group. Also in September, Beijing police detained US-based artist Gao Zhen, acclaimed for his work critiquing the late Chinese leader Mao Zedong, for "slandering China's heroes and martyrs" while he was visiting the country. Both topics-- China's economic policies and Mao's disastrous legacy – were topics that could be openly discussed in China until recently.

The Chinese government's strengthened information control has international implications, as it has targeted critics of China who have gone into exile and foreign nationals abroad. "Teacher Li," who collects news and videos from around China and broadcasts them on X, revealed that he had been harassed in Italy, where he is based. Chinese police had also interrogated his followers in China. In August, investigative reports exposed how people affiliated with the Chinese government had intimidated and assaulted Chinese, Hong Kong and Tibetan protesters during Xi's visit to San Francisco earlier.

The Chinese government's nine-year-sentence of Taiwanese political activist Yang Chih-yuan for "separatism," and the suspended death sentence of naturalized Australian writer Yang Hengjun for "espionage" generated widespread attention in these countries. In February, the prominent Hugo Award for science fiction was found to have self-censored and excluded some authors for consideration for its 2023 award before holding its ceremony in China.

## Freedom of Religion

The Chinese government allows people to practice only five officially recognized religions in approved premises, and maintains control over personnel appointments, publications, finances, and seminary applications.

Since 2016, when President Xi called for "Sinicization" of religions, authorities have sought to reshape religions to promote allegiance to the Party and to Xi. They have stepped up ideological education of religious leaders. They have removed "unauthorized" religious materials online, including by taking down religious apps and videos, and by harassing those who make and share such materials.

Police routinely arrest, detain, and harass leaders and members of various "illegal" religious groups, including those Catholic and Protestant congregations (or "house churches") that refuse to join official churches, and disrupt their peaceful activities. Throughout 2024, these individuals were charged with and convicted of fabricated crimes. In July, Zhang Chunlei, leader of a house church called Ren'ai Reformed Church, was sentenced to five years in prison for "inciting subversion" and "fraud." The government continues to classify some religious groups, notably the Falun Gong, as "evil cults," and subjects their members to harassment, arbitrary imprisonment, and torture.

In October, the Vatican renewed for the third time the 2018 China-Vatican agreement, which gives the Chinese authorities the power to name Catholic bishops even as they continue to persecute Catholic house churches and leaders, notably Bishop Cui Tai.

In September, the government freed Chinese-American pastor David Lin, after he had served nearly 20 years in prison.

## Human Rights Defenders

Human rights defenders in China are frequently harassed, tortured, and imprisoned. The police also harass their families, including children. Some, such as lawyer Gao Zhisheng and Peng Lifa, known as "Bridge Man" for his public display of anti-government signs, remain forcibly disappeared.

In February, women's rights activist Li Qiaochu was sentenced to nearly four years in prison for speaking out on detention conditions faced by her partner and fellow activist Xu Zhiyong. She was released in August after completing her sentence, having been detained since 2021. In October, Xu Zhiyong went on a hunger strike to protest his inhumane treatment in prison.

Chinese authorities released citizen journalist Zhang Zhan in May after she served a four-year prison sentence for reporting on the Covid-19 pandemic. They detained her again in late August and in November arrested her for “creating disturbances”.

In June, feminist journalist Huang Xueqin and labor rights activist Wang Jianbing were sentenced, respectively, to five years and three years and six months in prison for “inciting subversion of state power” for their leading involvement in the #MeToo Movement.

In October, human rights lawyer Yu Wensheng and his wife, rights activist Xu Yan, were convicted of “inciting subversion of state power” Yu was sentenced to three years in prison and Xu to 21 months. They were taken into custody while on their way to meet the European Union delegation to China in April 2023.

## Women’s and Girls’ Rights

Gender discrimination in employment remains widespread while alarming cases of violence against women and sexual harassment have received public attention in recent years.

China’s declining fertility rate has led the government to pivot from restricting births to exhorting women to get married and return to “traditional virtues” in ways that undermine gender equality.

The government’s push for higher birth rates is limited to heterosexual, married couples. In a landmark case, a Beijing court rejected Xu Zaozao’s final appeal to freeze her eggs, in a blow to the reproductive rights of single women.

In August, the Chinese government proposed a revised draft law to simplify marriage registration while adding an abusive “30-day cooling off” period to make it harder to divorce.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

While there is growing public acceptance of equal rights for LGBT people in China,

increasing repression has also led to greater censorship and closure of LGBT spaces and advocacy groups.

In January, Weibo censored viral photos and videos of transgender celebrity Jin Xing, who was holding a rainbow flag with the slogan "love is love, love and gender are unrelated." One of China's few remaining lesbian bars, Roxie, closed in June, alluding to official pressure.

In August, a custody ruling handed down by a Beijing court became the first legal recognition in China that a child can have two mothers. However, the petitioner, Didi, was denied contact with her son on the grounds that she did not give birth to him and is not genetically related to him.

## Tibet

Authorities continue to severely control information in Tibetan areas and respond to public concerns over issues such as mass relocation, environmental degradation, or the marginalization of Tibetan language in primary education with repression.

Available information suggests that most detentions in the Tibetan areas were for posting unapproved content online or having online contact with Tibetans outside China. Tibetans accused of such offenses have been sentenced to years in prison.

In February and March, hundreds of monks and villagers in Derge county, Sichuan, were reportedly detained for protesting the construction of a hydroelectric dam that will submerge historic monasteries and numerous Tibetan villages.

## Hong Kong

In March, the Hong Kong government introduced another national security law, the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (SNSO), after the draconian 2020 National Security Law. The SNSO criminalizes peaceful activities, expands police powers, and replaces the colonial-era sedition law, raising the maximum sentence for "sedition" from two to seven years of imprisonment.

After the SNSO came into effect, police arrested six people in May, including prominent activist Chow Hang-tung who is already imprisoned, for allegedly publishing "seditious" posts online to commemorate the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre. Three people were sentenced to between 10 and 14 months in prison for "sedition" for wearing a T-shirt, making online posts, and drawing pro-democracy graffiti on buses. The Hong Kong government used the new powers under the SNSO to revoke the Hong Kong passports of six exiled activists and to deny political prisoners early release for good behavior.

In May, three judges handpicked for national security cases convicted 14 activists and ex-Hong Kong lawmakers of "conspiracy to commit subversion" in the city's largest national security trial to date, with 31 other defendants having earlier pleaded guilty. The court sentenced them to prison terms ranging from 4 years and 2 months to 10 years.

At least 304 people have been arrested for allegedly violating the National Security Law, the SNSO, and the now-revoked "sedition" law since 2020. Among the 176 individuals charged, 161 have been convicted. According to police figures, 10,279 people have been arrested in connection with the 2019 pro-democracy protests, among whom 2,328 "faced legal consequences" including conviction, many for non-violent crimes like "unlawful assembly."

Press freedom declined further. Media tycoon Jimmy Lai's national security trial, which began in December 2023, is ongoing. The 76-year-old Lai has been held in solitary confinement since December 2020. In September, two journalists of the now-defunct Stand News were sentenced to 21 and 11 months respectively for "sedition." That month, the government denied work visa and entry into the city to an Associated Press photojournalist who took photos of Jimmy Lai in prison.

The Hong Kong government has repeatedly harassed the Hong Kong Journalist Association, including making a claim for HK$400,000 (US$51,000) in back taxes. Both Radio Free Asia, funded by the US government, and *Epoch Times*, a media outlet run by the persecuted religious group Falun Gong, closed their Hong Kong offices in 2024.

Authorities curtailed freedoms of expression, association and assembly. On June 4, police arrested at least nine people for holding placards, lighting candles, or turning on their

phone flashlights near Victoria Park, where the Tiananmen Massacre commemorations took place before 2020.

The government also curbed freedom of expression. In May, the High Court ruled that the government's injunction to block use of the popular 2019 protest song "Glory to Hong Kong" was lawful. Scottish and US distributors repeatedly removed the song from streaming platforms even though the order had no extraterritorial effect. In October, Hong Kong authorities appeared to block some Hong Kong internet users' access to *Flow HK*, an online magazine hosted in the US.

In January, the government-funded Hong Kong Arts Development Council withdrew its funding for the Hong Kong Drama Awards, while the Leisure and Cultural Services Department refused to provide the awards ceremony a venue.

## Xinjiang

The Chinese government has committed crimes against humanity against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims as part of its abusive "Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism." Violations in Xinjiang include mass arbitrary detention torture, mass surveillance, forced labor, cultural and religious persecution, and family separation.

The Chinese government has continued to deny these abuses. Responding to a number of relevant recommendations made during the Universal Periodic Review of its rights record by the UN Human Rights Council in January, the Chinese government dismissed a groundbreaking 2022 UN report documenting these abuses, including alleged crimes against humanity, as "illegal and void." In August, the office of the UN high commissioner for human rights reported that "many problematic laws and policies" underlying the 2022 UN report remain in place and noted the challenges in monitoring the situation due to "limited access to information and the fear of reprisals against individuals who engage with the United Nations." In September, the US delivered a joint statement at the UN Human Rights Council on behalf of the "core group of countries" that previously sought a dedicated discussion of the situation by the UN rights body, calling on the Chinese government to "engage meaningfully" with the UN to implement the report's recommendations.

Official Chinese statements continue to affirm its abusive campaign, which conflates Uyghurs' everyday peaceful behavior with terrorism and extremism. In May, a top central government official responsible for political and legal affairs, Chen Wenqing, said the government will "persist in cracking down on violent terrorist crimes" and "promote legalization and normalization of counterterrorism and stability maintenance" in the Uyghur region.

An estimated half-million people have been sentenced to long prison sentences without due process during the Strike Hard Campaign, and many remain imprisoned, including Rahile Dawut, Gulshan Abbas, Perhat Tursun, Adil Tuniyaz, Yalqun Rozi, Ekpar Asat. Prominent Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti has spent 10 years in prison as part of his unjust life sentence for "separatism."

In February, China revised regulations in Xinjiang to further tighten control over religious practices, which includes controlling the appearance, number, location and size of religious venues, and requiring them to become training grounds that promote the values of the Chinese Communist Party to the people.

A Human Rights Watch report found that global car brands have increasing risk of exposure to Uyghur forced labor in their aluminum supply chain, adding to a growing body of research that shows that Uyghur forced labor taints industries globally, including solar panels, cars, apparel, seafood, and critical minerals. Since the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in 2022 entered into force, the US government has denied entry to $750 million worth of goods linked to forced labor in Xinjiang. The European Union approved a law in December prohibiting the import and export of goods linked to forced labor

## Climate Change Policy and Impacts

China is the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, largest producer and consumer of coal, and the largest importer of oil and gas. Its banks are among the largest financiers of fossil-fuel operations in the world.

Despite improved targets, the Climate Action Tracker rates China's domestic emission reduction target as "highly insufficient" to meet the Paris Agreement goal to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Extreme weather events driven

by global warming have become more common across China and are projected to increase in frequency and severity.

# Colombia

Abuses by armed groups, limited access to justice, and high levels of poverty, especially among rural, Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, remain serious human rights concerns in Colombia.

The 2016 peace accord between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the government ended a five-decade-long conflict and brought an initial decline in violence. But violence took new forms and abuses, with an increased presence of armed groups in many remote areas. Two and a half years since President Gustavo Petro took office, his "total peace" strategy has achieved limited results in curbing abuses against civilians.

Colombia was elected to serve as a member of the UN Human Rights Council for the 2025-2027 term.

## Abuses by Armed Groups

Numerous armed groups operate in Colombia fueled by illegal economies, including drug trafficking and illegal mining. These include the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla, a group formed in the 1960s; several "dissident" groups that emerged from the 2017 demobilization of the FARC; and the "Gulf Clan." The latter emerged from the demobilization of paramilitary groups in the mid-2000s and is also known as the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AGC). Many of these groups have fluid and complex links to each other, and some are parties to non-international armed conflicts.

Armed groups continue to commit serious abuses against civilians and expand their presence across the country. Security forces and judicial authorities have often failed to effectively protect the population, ensure victims' access to justice, and meaningfully investigate and dismantle criminal groups. As of June, the Gulf Clan had a presence in 392 municipalities; the ELN, in 232; and the "dissident" groups of the FARC, in 299. These figures represent an increase of 55 percent, 23 percent, and 30 percent, respectively, compared to 2022.

The Ombudsperson's Office reported 159 cases of child recruitment in the first half of 2024 compared to 184 throughout 2023. Recruited children are frequently members of Indigenous communities.

Over 71,000 people were prevented from leaving their communities, a situation known as "confinement," between January and July, a 39 percent increase compared to the same period in 2023. Fears of antipersonnel landmines, threats by armed groups, and the hazards of crossfire persisted.

In the western and southwestern states of Chocó, Cauca, and Nariño, fighting among the military and armed groups displaced more than 34,000 people, between January and July, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

## Violations by Public Security Forces

Since President Petro took office in August 2022, Colombia has seen a decrease in the number of reported violations by security forces. However, accountability for past abuses and reforms to ensure non-repetition remain limited.

In July, prosecutors charged 24 members of the Army with the killing of 11 civilians during a March 2022 operation in Alto Remanso, Putumayo state, in southern Colombia. The Constitutional Court rejected, in April, a request by defense lawyers to transfer the case to the military courts, which have historically failed to ensure justice.

While the ministry of defense reformed protocols related to the use of force and suspended some police officers responsible for abuses, it has failed to introduce broader reforms, including to limit the jurisdiction of the military justice system over investigations into human rights violations committed by security forces and to move the police out of the purview of the Ministry of Defense to ensure separation between the roles of the police and military.

## Violence against Human Rights Defenders and Other People at Risk

Between January and August, OHCHR received 138 allegations of killings of human rights defenders and social leaders, mostly of people defending community rights, compared to

157 in the same period in 2023. As of September, three social leaders have been killed each week, according to the Attorney General's Office.

Colombia has a broad range of policies, mechanisms, and laws to prevent abuses against human rights defenders and other people at higher risk, including demobilized FARC combatants. But implementation of these measures has often been poor.

In a case brought by Colombian human rights groups, the Constitutional Court ordered in December 2023 broad government action to protect human rights defenders and hold those responsible for their killings to account. The court found that government action fell short of addressing these "persistent, grave and widespread" violations and described the situation as an "unconstitutional state of affairs."

## Peace Negotiations, Negotiated Disarmament, and Accountability

The 2016 peace agreement established a plan to reduce rural poverty, increase citizen participation, disarm and reintegrate former FARC combatants, sever links between drug trafficking and political violence, and address victims' rights through transitional justice measures. Despite President's Petro support of the peace agreement, its implementation remains elusive.

The Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) has made significant strides in investigating and prosecuting war crimes and crimes against humanity, charging top former FARC commanders and several army officers. Investigations of kidnapping, extrajudicial executions and child recruitment cases continued in 2024.

Defendants who fully cooperate with the JEP and confess to their crimes are subject to up to eight years of "special sanctions," including effective restriction of liberty but no prison time. The JEP has yet to convict and sentence any individual or clarify how the retributive component of the "special sanctions" will operate in practice to assure its compliance with international law.

The first adversarial trial before the JEP began in September against Colonel Hernán Mejía Gutiérrez for "war crimes and crimes against humanity" related to the extrajudicial killings

of 72 people in the northern state of Cesar. In 2013, he was sentenced by the ordinary criminal justice system to 19 years in prison for colluding with paramilitary groups.

Throughout 2024, the government continued to negotiate with the ELN guerrilla, a coalition of FARC dissident groups self-referred to as Estado Mayor Central (EMC) and Segunda Marquetalia, and other armed groups, including the Gulf Clan, as part of its "total peace" policy. The government announced several cease-fires with these groups, but the preparations and monitoring were insufficient, and in many cases armed groups failed to comply. The government also expressed its interest in negotiating new transitional justice mechanisms with these groups.

## Internal Displacement, Reparations, and Land Restitution

OCHA reported that more than 121,000 people were victims of "mass" or "individual" forced displacement between January and July, with "mass displacements" defined as the displacement of 50 or more people or 10 or more families.

Municipalities and state governments often lack sufficient funding to assist displaced people, and national government assistance has often been slow and insufficient.

Around 16 percent of more than 9.7 million registered victims of the armed conflict had received reparations as of August.

## Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants

As of September, more than 2.9 million Venezuelans lived in Colombia; 2 million of them had been granted temporary protection that provides them 10 years of legal status, out of roughly 2.5 million who had requested it.

In September, the government passed a decree allowing guardians and custodians of Venezuelan children holding a Temporary Protection Permit (Permiso por Protección Temporal, PPT) to obtain a Guardian Special Stay Permit (Permiso Especial de Permanencia, PEP-TUTOR).

Hundreds of thousands of migrants crossed Colombia's Darién Gap into Panama in 2024, in most cases believed to be headed to the United States. During their days-long walk across the perilous jungle, migrants and asylum seekers of all nationalities are frequently victims of robbery and serious abuses, including rape. The government lacks a clear strategy to safeguard their rights, which leaves them with little security, aid, or access to justice.

## Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking

Women and girls are subjects of human trafficking. This particularly affects Venezuelan migrants and refugees and Afro-Colombian communities in departments such as Antioquia, Norte de Santander and Cundinamarca and the Capital District.

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, criminal organizations and armed groups are "heavily engaged" in these activities. Access to legal aid, safe accommodations, long-term assistance and compensation is limited.

Many women and girls also experience sexual exploitation, including in so-called "webcam houses," facing labor abuses and unsanitary conditions.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Despite constitutional protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people continue to face high levels of violence and discrimination. According to figures from the NGO Colombia Diversa published in July, 159 LGBT people were killed in 2023, including 32 possibly based on prejudice. In February, the Attorney General's Office created a unit to investigate crimes motivated by a victim's sexual orientation or gender identity.

## Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

High levels of poverty, especially among rural, Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, remain a serious human rights concern.

The 2016 peace accord established "Territorial Development Programs" (PDET) to increase the presence of state institutions in 170 municipalities highly affected by the armed

conflict, poverty, and illegal economies, such as drug trafficking. According to figures released by the government in April, the multidimensional poverty rate in these areas (23.7 percent) was almost double the national rate (12.1 percent) in 2023. Efforts to implement the PDET have been limited.

## Climate Policy and Impacts

In September, the government ratified the Escazú Agreement, a regional accord that shores up protection for ecosystems and their defenders. The ratification came after the Constitutional Court ruled in August that the agreement, approved by Congress in 2022, was consistent with Colombia's Constitution.

Colombia's national plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is "insufficient" to meet the Paris Agreement goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, according to the latest assessment of the Climate Action Tracker. The plan commits Colombia to reducing deforestation to 50,000 hectares per year by 2030. Colombia subsequently joined the Glasgow Declaration, which commits it to "halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030."

In the first quarter of 2024, the government registered an increase of 40 percent in deforestation compared to the same period in 2023. According to government figures, 79,000 hectares of land were deforested in 2023, a 36 percent decrease compared to 2022, the lowest figure in decades.

Cattle ranchers and FARC dissident groups were major drivers of deforestation, pressuring residents to cut down trees, extorting farmers, promoting coca crops to produce cocaine, or threatening people who defend conservation. Halting deforestation was an agenda item in the "total peace" negotiations.

## Freedom of Expression

According to Reporters Without Borders, Colombia remained one of the most dangerous countries for journalists. The Office of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression documented the killing of at least five journalists, between January and July.

The president continued to use social media to stigmatize journalists and media outlets perceived as critics of his government. In September, he issued a presidential instruction aimed at all officials of the executive branch to guarantee a safe environment for freedom of expression and journalists, including by avoiding stigmatizing statements, yet failed to comply with it during the launching event.

# Cuba

The government continues to repress and punish virtually all forms of dissent and public criticism, as Cubans continue to endure a dire economic crisis affecting rights, including access to health and food.

Hundreds of critics and protesters, including many who took to the streets in July 2021, remain arbitrarily detained. The country faced waves of protests, triggered by blackouts, shortages, and the deterioration of living conditions, as Cubans continue to leave the country in large numbers.

The United States policy of isolation toward Cuba remains in place, including a decades-long embargo and a designation of the country as a State Sponsor of Terrorism.

## Arbitrary Detention and Prosecution

The authorities, as in previous years, arbitrarily detained, harassed and intimidated critics, independent activists, political opponents, and others. Many were at various times held incommunicado, with some facing ill-treatment, and in some cases torture.

Following protests in March as a result of power outages and food shortages, rights groups documented at least 20 people detained. In June, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) determined that the detention of 17 people apprehended after the July 2021 protests, the largest since the Cuban revolution, was arbitrary. Rights groups reported that over 650 protesters, including over 40 women, are behind bars.

Prosecutors often framed as criminal behavior actions such as criticizing the government on social media or protesting peacefully, which are lawful exercises of freedoms of expression and association.

## Migration

Between January and August 2024, the US Border Patrol apprehended Cubans more than 97,000 times, which may include multiple encounters with the same people. Many

traveled north on the way to the US through Nicaragua, which waived visa requirements for Cubans in 2021.

According to official figures, the Cuban population shrunk by 10 percent between December 2021 and December 2023, mostly due to emigration.

In August, the National Assembly passed a bill that would allow the government to strip Cubans abroad of their nationality if they "carry out acts contrary to the high political, economic and social interests of the Republic of Cuba." At time of writing, it had not been signed into law.

## Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

The economic crisis in Cuba severely impacted the enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights as Cubans endured electricity blackouts, in some places for up to 20 hours a day, and acute shortages of food, medicine, and other essential items.

In October, Cubans suffered a nationwide blackout that affected 10 out of Cuba's 11 million people. Some parts of the country had no electricity for up to 70 hours.

In February, Cuba requested assistance from the UN World Food Programme (WFP) for the first time. It asked the WFP to provide powdered milk for children under seven years old. In April, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and its Special Rapporteur on Economic, Social, Cultural, and Environmental Rights "expressed concern over the recent worsening of food insecurity and prolonged power outages in Cuba."

## Political Prisoners

Prisoners Defenders, a Madrid-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) reported that as of August, Cuba held over 1,000 people, including 30 children under age 18, as political prisoners.

Government critics risk criminal prosecution, and are not guaranteed due process, such as the right to fair and public hearings by a competent, independent, and impartial tribunal. In practice, courts are subordinate to the executive branch.

Maykel Castillo Pérez and Manuel Otero Alcántara remain in jail. Castillo Pérez, a musician and human rights activist and co-writer of the song "Patria y Vida" (Motherland and Life), which criticizes the Cuban government, was detained in May 2021 and has been in prison ever since. Otero Alcántara was arrested in July 2021 after announcing in a video that he would join the protests.

José Daniel Ferrer, leader of the Cuban Patriotic Union, the main opposition party, remained in prison at year's end. A court in Santiago de Cuba sentenced him to four and a half years of "restrictions on freedom" for alleged "assault" in 2020. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention deemed the case as arbitrary. In 2021, officers detained Ferrer as he was heading to a demonstration, and a court ruled that Ferrer failed to comply with the "restrictions on freedom," and sent him to the Mar Verde prison. His relatives said he has been held incommunicado for long periods and suffers health problems. In a resolution adopted in September, the European Parliament called for Ferrer's immediate release and the release of others arbitrarily detained.

Rights group Justicia 11J reported that families of political prisoners have faced state harassment, with security agents, in several instances, calling or visiting the homes of relatives to harass and dissuade them from speaking out against abuses.

## Prison Conditions

Prisons are often overcrowded. Detainees have no effective complaint mechanism to seek redress for abuses.

The government continues to deny Cuban and international human rights groups access to prisons, while rights organizations and journalists report food shortages, inadequate access to health care, and outbreaks of tuberculosis.

## Freedom of Expression

The government controls virtually all media in Cuba, restricts access to outside information, and periodically censors critics and independent journalists.

Increased access to the internet has enabled activists to communicate, report on abuses, and organize protests. Some journalists and bloggers publish news articles and videos on social media, including X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook, and the website 14yMedio. Authorities routinely block access to many news websites within Cuba and repeatedly impose targeted, and at times widespread, restrictions on critics' access to mobile phone data.

In April, a court in Camagüey sentenced Miyelín Rodríguez Prado to 15 years in jail for streaming images of protests in Nuevitas on Facebook. The tribunal said Rodríguez Prado's streaming amounted to "enemy propaganda."

## International Actors

Authorities in Cuba continue to use the US embargo as a pretext for abuses and a way to garner sympathy from governments that might otherwise condemn Cuba's repressive practices.

US President Joe Biden has not lifted former President Donald Trump's re-designation of Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, which according to UN experts, has further undermined the ability of Cuban authorities to provide social and other services in the country.

# Democratic Republic of Congo

In December 2023, President Félix Tshisekedi was elected for a second term amid a deteriorating human rights and humanitarian situation. Authorities cracked down on opposition members, civil society activists, critics, and journalists throughout 2024.

Hostilities in North Kivu led to significant displacement of populations, disrupted humanitarian aid delivery, and created food shortages in Goma, the provincial capital. The warring parties – the national army and allied militias and Rwandan troops and the M23 armed group – killed civilians, committed abuses against camp residents, and increased risks faced by internally displaced people. The Rwandan army and the M23 indiscriminately shelled populated areas.

## Civic, Media, and Political Space

The authorities targeted real or perceived critics, including through apparently politically motivated arrests, detentions, and prosecutions. The authorities repressed those independently reporting on the conflict in the east and used martial law, in place in North-Kivu and Ituri since 2021, to curtail freedom of expression.

The national media regulator restricted reporting on the conflict in the east.

In November, political opponent and former presidential candidate Seth Kikuni was sentenced to one year in prison for "propagating rumors" and "civil disobedience." In September, he had been arrested and allegedly detained by intelligence services, with no apparent access to his legal counsel and family for days, and was transferred to Makala Central Prison in Kinshasa, the capital, despite being in poor health.

In October, Tshisekedi proposed steps to amend the country's constitution. Rights groups and the political opposition criticized the move, fearing that Tshisekedi was seeking to bypass the constitutional two-term limit.

In August, human rights defenders Jack Sinzahera and Gloire Saasita, who held a news conference to criticize the "state of siege," were held without charge for weeks. Both were released on November 8.

In May, unidentified men abducted Gloria Sengha, a civil society activist, along with two colleagues, Robert Bunda and Chadrack Tshadio, after a meeting in Kinshasa. Tshadio was released days after the abduction while Sengha and Bunda were released on July 4.

In July, the media regulator suspended journalist Jessy Kabasele following a radio interview he conducted with Koffi Olomide, a singer, in which Olomide criticized the army's response to the M23. The media regulator blamed Kabasele for inadequately reframing Olomide's speech, arguing his criticism "undermines the enormous efforts and sacrifices made by the government."

In July, activist Fortifi Lushima was abducted by unidentified men after criticizing on television the government's response to the conflict. He was released days later.

In March, after being convicted on charges believed to be baseless and spending six months in prison, Stanis Bujakera, deputy director of the online news outlet Actualite.cd and reporter for *Jeune Afrique*, was released.

In February, activists Freud Bauma and Bienvenu Matumo were arrested following a public gathering on the M23 occupation. Both were released after two nights in detention.

## Armed Conflict in the East

Over 100 armed groups are active in eastern Congo, mainly in Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. The M23 armed group, which re-emerged in late 2021 with Rwandan government support, took territory across North Kivu, effectively encircling Goma.

The UN reported on both Rwandan and Ugandan troops providing support to the M23, with the Rwandan army taking a direct role in hostilities against Congolese forces.

The accelerated withdrawal of the United Nations peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO) requested by Tshisekedi in September 2023 had not been completed at time of writing.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) mission was deployed in December 2023 “to restore peace and security in the eastern [Congo]."

The Congolese military and allied coalition of abusive militias known as “Wazalendo” (“patriots” in Swahili) were credibly implicated in laws-of-war violations in combatting the Rwandan army and the M23.

In April, 48 leaders of armed groups travelled to Kinshasa to discuss the Wazalendo coalition and collaboration with the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). The Congolese government supports Wazalendo and FDLR to fight alongside Congolese forces.

On January 25, the Congolese army fired at least two rounds of heavy artillery into Mweso, Masisi territory – which Rwandan and M23 forces held – killing at least 19 civilians, and hitting close to the town’s hospital.

In addition, the Congolese military placed military objectives, including artillery positions, close to displacement sites, putting civilians at unnecessary risk by exposing them to counterfire from opposing belligerent parties.

Both Congolese soldiers and Wazalendo fighters opened fire inside displacement camps, killing and injuring civilians. Wazalendo elements also detained and extorted civilians.

The Rwandan military and the M23 committed grave laws-of-war violations as they gained control of areas closer to Goma. Between January and September, the Rwandan military and the M23 launched at least five apparently unlawful attacks, striking populated areas near Goma, including displacement camps.

Both warring parties have raped women.

Armed men presence inside displaced camps and the need for women to look for food outside of camps increased insecurity and put women at heightened risk of sexual violence. In August, Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders, MSF) said more than 1 in 10 young women in camps reported being raped between November 2023 and April 2024.

The Angolan and Kenyan governments led mediation efforts between Congo and Rwanda, with backing from the African Union.

In Ituri, the Zaïre and Coopérative pour le Développement du Congo (CODECO) armed groups resumed hostilities, with COEDCO regularly clashing with the Congolese military and UN-peacekeeping soldiers. According to the UN and media reports, CODECO fighters attacked civilians, displacement sites, and humanitarian personnel.

The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) intensified attacks against urban centers and killed civilians. According to the UN, the ADF is the armed group responsible for the highest number of killings in Congo, mainly civilians.

## Justice and Accountability

In September, at least 129 prisoners died, including 24 shot while trying to escape, and 59 were injured during an attempted prison break at Makala Central Prison. The government announced that a commission would be created to establish the facts around the incident although, at time of writing, no such commission had been established. Makala, like many prisons across Congo, has massive overcrowding, poor infrastructure, and inadequate resources.

An internal report by the UN Population Fund found that 268 out of the 348 women held in Makala prison – nearly 80 percent – were victims of rape and other sexual violence during the attempted prison break. The report noted that 17 of the survivors of sexual violence were younger than 19. Sexual violence has been a longstanding problem in Congo's prisons.

A May 19 attempted coup led to the deaths of at least two security guards, one civilian, and several coup participants. In September, a military court in Kinshasa handed down death sentences to 37 people – including several foreigners – associated with the failed coup. The government had announced in March that it was ending a 20-year moratorium on the death penalty. Following the announcement, about 80 people were sentenced to death between May and August, sparking an outcry from rights groups. No executions had been conducted at time of writing.

In May, the trial of armed group members, politicians, and representatives of Congolese security forces for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in 2017-2018 opened before a military court in the Kasai province.

## Cooperation with the United Nations

Congo will join the UN Human Rights Council as a member in January 2025, creating an additional responsibility for the authorities to uphold the highest standards for human rights protection.

In November, the universal periodic review of Congo's at the UN showed that the government made little progress in addressing widespread rights issues. The government has until the next UNHRC session in early 2025 to signal which UN member states' recommendations it will implement.

On October 14, the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced it would step up investigative efforts in Congo, focusing in particular on crimes committed in North Kivu since January 2022. This action was prompted by a 2023 Congolese government request.

In April, the implementation of ICC-ordered reparations in the case against Germain Katanga was completed. Katanga was convicted by the ICC in 2014 for crimes committed in Ituri in 2003.

# Ecuador

In a context of fragile democratic institutions, Ecuador has seen a sharp increase in violence by organized crime, which took homicide rates to unprecedented levels.

Following President Daniel Noboa's announcement that the country is in an "internal armed conflict," security forces engaged in serious human rights violations.

Longstanding structural problems, related, among other things, to access to health, education, and employment, remain unaddressed, limiting the enjoyment of economic and social rights.

## Violence and Crime

Homicides rose 429 percent from the first half of 2019 to 2024, when 3,036 were recorded. A 16 percent drop compared to the same period in 2023 but still higher than the 2,128 in 2022, according to the Ecuadorian Observatory on Organized Crime. As of September, police reportedly received over 2,000 reports of kidnappings and over 10,700 reports of extortion. One in three Ecuadorians has been a victim of crime, the highest number in the region.

Since January, following a surge in violence, President Noboa has decreed long-lasting states of emergency and an "internal armed conflict" against criminal groups, without providing "sufficient information to justify the existence of one or more non-international armed conflicts," according to the Constitutional Court.

Ecuador's militarization of its streets and prisons since January has led to serious human rights violations by security forces, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment.

## Prison Conditions

The lack of state control, overcrowding, and poor prison conditions have enabled organized crime to dominate prisons.

Since January, the military has held many detainees incommunicado for long periods, obstructing access to lawyers and medical care. Other documented abuses against detainees include beatings, the improper use of tear gas, electric shocks, sexual violence, and killings.

In February, a judge ruled that the military endangered detainees and prison authorities failed in their duties, ordering medical care and an investigation into torture. Human rights groups, detainees' families, and the United Nations Committee against Torture also raised concerns about inhumane prison conditions, including food shortages.

## Democratic Institutions and the Rule of Law

Democratic institutions, particularly the judicial system, remained fragile, plagued by allegations of corruption and weak capacity to combat impunity and organized crime.

The Attorney General's Office has opened several investigations against judges, prosecutors and authorities from the Judiciary Council for alleged organized crime, bribery, money laundering, influence peddling, and obstruction of justice.

Judges and prosecutors are at risk and lack adequate protection. At least 15 have been killed since 2022.

Allegations of lack of due process in judicial proceedings and improper pressures on courts and judges continued. In February, President Noboa labeled a judge "unpatriotic" after the judge ruled against security forces due to human rights violations in prison.

Reports continued of problematic selection and appointment procedures for senior officials. The UN Human Rights Committee and civil society groups voiced concerns about the selection process for judges, including of the National Court of Justice, claiming that the processes lacked transparency and citizen involvement, raising questions about its impartiality. Concerns have also been raised regarding the delays and rules for the selection process for the next attorney general.

In November, the Ministry of Labor suspended vice president Verónica Abad for "unjustified abandonment" of her duties just weeks before she was supposed to replace

President Noboa during the electoral campaign. The Ministry failed to provide a legal basis for its decision. The same month, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal barred Jan Topic from running for president in the 2025 election, based on "confidential evidence," raising concerns over respect for due process and political rights.

## Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

As of June, close to 26 percent of Ecuadorians were living below the national poverty line, with figures climbing to around 43 percent in rural areas. Additionally, 10.6 percent lived in "extreme poverty," reaching 24.1 percent in rural areas, meaning their per capita family income was below US$51.60 per month.

Despite a slight decrease in unemployment rates compared to the second semester of 2023, the national unemployment rate stood at 3.5 percent, with 52.5 percent of those employed working in the informal sector.

Ecuador follows Bolivia and Venezuela as the third country with the highest prevalence of hunger in South America, impacting 2.5 million people, according to the UN Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition.

Millions of people have been impacted by nationwide power outages due to a drought disturbing hydroelectricity power generation, affecting their rights to education, work and health.

## Freedom of Expression

In November, the organization Fundamedios reported over 160 "attacks" on freedom of expression and freedom of the press, including stigmatizing speech, verbal assaults against journalists, and barriers to accessing information, most of which were carried out by state actors and organized crime.

In June, the TV program "Los Irreverentes" was cancelled, reportedly after pressure from the government, according to Fundamedios. In the same month, the Foreign Minister's Office cancelled Cuban journalist Alondra Santiago's visa for "threatening public safety

and the structure of the State" after she criticized the government with a song based on the national anthem.

## Migrants, Asylum Seekers, and Refugees

Despite a progressive constitutional and legal framework, many migrants and asylum seekers in Ecuador struggle to obtain regular status and integrate. Despite having over 77,900 refugees in the country, Ecuador's application of the Cartagena Declaration's expanded refugee definition is inconsistent.

A 2022 regularization process granted over 95,000 foreign nationals, mainly Venezuelans, a two-year legal status, but the process is currently closed. In August, the government extended the regularization process to legalize Venezuelans who had registered within the established deadlines but had not obtained visas.

While just a few hundred Ecuadorians crossed the Darien Gap between Colombia and Panama in 2021, the number spiked in 2023, spurred by economic factors and general insecurity, reaching 57,250. Over 14,700 crossed the gap between January and August 2024.

## Children's Rights

Sexual violence remains endemic in Ecuador's schools and finding justice is elusive for many survivors. Between January 2014 and August 2024, authorities registered over 6,700 cases of sexual violence against students committed by teachers, school staff, other students or bus drivers.

Government measures to respond to sexual violence in schools have not progressed at the scale and pace needed to ensure that all children are safe.

In August, President Noboa signed a policy to eradicate sexual violence in schools by 2030, following the 2020 Inter-American Court ruling in *Paola Guzmán Albarracín v. Ecuador*. Civil society groups voiced concerns over lack of adequate funding for its implementation.

The surge in violence and organized crime severely impacted children's rights, with homicides of adolescents rising 17 percent compared to the first semester of 2023, according to the Ecuadorian Observatory on Organized Crime. It has also led to increased child recruitment and compromised the right to a safe learning environment.

In April, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child cancelled its upcoming session due to lack of funds, reducing scrutiny of developments in Ecuador.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

Abortion is criminalized in Ecuador, except when a pregnancy threatens a person's health or life or results from rape. In April, Justa Libertad, an Ecuadorian coalition of eight civil society organizations, filed a lawsuit before the Constitutional Court of Ecuador seeking to decriminalize abortion in all circumstances.

There remain significant barriers to this essential service, including stigmatization, mistreatment by healthcare providers, fear of criminal prosecution, and a narrow interpretation of legal exceptions for abortion. Women and girls who face prosecution under restrictive laws are often living in poverty and come from Indigenous or Afro-descendant communities.

The Ministry of Women and Human Rights reported 222 violent deaths (murders, homicides and femicides) of women and girls as of late June. The Attorney General's Office reported 59 femicides—murders deemed gender-related—between January and September.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In June, the government issued a regulation implementing a legal gender recognition procedure for transgender people based on self-determination, to comply with a 2017 ruling by the Constitutional Court.

The legislature has not complied with other court orders to revise civil marriage provisions to include same-sex couples, regulate assisted reproduction, and allow same-sex couples to register children with their surnames.

The constitution excludes same-sex couples from adoption.

## Environmental Protection and Indigenous Peoples' Rights

In May, President Noboa created a committee in charge of establishing the mechanisms to comply with the people's 2023 vote to halt current and future oil drilling in the Ishpingo, Tambococha, and Tiputini (ITT) area of Yasuní National Park. The park is a UN World Biosphere Reserve and the ancestral territory of the Waorani, the Tagaeri and the Taromenane Indigenous peoples, of which the latter two are uncontacted. The government did not comply with the one-year deadline established by the Constitutional Court to suspend the activities and affirmed this will be done "progressively."

Indigenous girls kept advocating—despite reported acts of intimidation—for the government to end gas flares impacting their communities in the Amazon region, as required by a 2021 ruling. By May, the government had quenched 145 of the 424 registered gas flares.

# Egypt

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's government entered its second decade in power by continuing wholesale repression, systematically detaining and punishing peaceful critics and activists and effectively criminalizing peaceful dissent. Authorities detained and prosecuted dozens of protesters and activists, including at Palestine solidarity demonstrations. Thousands of detainees remained locked up in dire conditions in lengthy pretrial detention or on sentences stemming from unjust trials.

Several leading human rights defenders were allowed to travel outside Egypt for the first time since 2016. However, civic space remained severely curtailed as independent organizations operating under draconian laws faced continued judicial and security harassment. Since January, Egypt signed bailout deals of about US$57 billion, yet the economic crisis, and the government's response, hampered people's economic and social rights, including to food, health, and electricity.

## Conduct of Security Forces

Interior Ministry police and National Security Agency (NSA) officers continued to arbitrarily detain, forcibly disappear, and torture critics and dissidents in official and unofficial places of detention.

In July, NSA officers arbitrarily detained political satire artist Ashraf Omar and journalist Khaled Mamdouh and held them incommunicado. Omar's family said that NSA agents tortured him and threatened to subject him to electric shocks while in secret detention.

Egyptian authorities appear to have made opaque amnesty deals in recent years with suspected members of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) affiliate in Egypt's North Sinai, without making the criteria public. International laws of war encourage the broadest possible amnesties at the end of non-international armed conflicts; however, this excludes anyone suspected, accused, or convicted of committing war crimes or other serious international crimes. Authorities have not clarified whether they have a plan for prosecuting those suspected of serious abuses such as mass civilian killings and extrajudicial executions.

Despite a relatively calm situation, authorities have continued to treat the North Sinai region as a de facto closed military zone and have prohibited independent reporting. The military continued to prevent tens of thousands of residents, whom it has forcibly evicted since 2013, from returning to their land.

## Military Jurisdiction

In January, parliament swiftly approved new government-proposed laws which granted the military sweeping new authority to fully or partially replace functions of the police, civilian judiciary, and other civilian authorities, and to further expand the jurisdiction of military courts to prosecute civilians.

Law No. 3 of 2024 provides military personnel involved in certain operations with the same judicial powers of arrest and seizure as the police. It also stipulates that all offenses against or in relation to broadly worded "vital" public facilities and buildings are to be prosecuted in military courts. In recent years, abusive laws have been used to prosecute thousands of civilians, including children, in military courts.

## Freedom of Expression and Assembly

Supreme State Security Prosecution (SSSP), an abusive branch of Egypt's public prosecution, is responsible for keeping thousands of peaceful activists and journalists in pretrial detention for months or years without evidence of wrongdoing. It has detained many journalists on spurious charges often related to their work. For example, prosecutors held satirist Ashraf Omar and journalist Khaled Mamdouh in pretrial detention since July without evidence of wrongdoing. Lawyers said they faced charges of "spreading false information," "belonging to a terrorist group," and "misusing social media."

In early July, the SSSP arbitrarily referred Abdelrahman Mahmoud Abdou, a researcher and journalist also known as Abdelrahman Ayyash, to a criminal court. The indictment charged Ayyash alongside four others with "leadership of a terrorist group," while 41 others were charged with joining or financing the unnamed group. Ayyash, who is living in exile, said he did not receive formal notice of the charges.

On July 16, the Interior Ministry said it detained a man it claimed was responsible for displaying criticism of President Sisi on a billboard screen in Giza, which went viral on social media. Such criticism is protected free expression that should not be penalized.

In July, authorities arbitrarily detained more than 100 individuals amid online calls for protests in response to price hikes and power cuts. The protests did not materialize, and authorities preemptively detained people based on online posts. Authorities have also continued to renew the pretrial detention of protesters including those detained in Palestine solidarity protests in 2023.

## Attacks on Human Rights Defenders and Freedom of Association

Authorities allowed prominent human rights defenders, such as Gamal Eid, Hossam Bahgat, and others, to travel abroad for the first time since 2016, when they were prosecuted alongside dozens of other human rights advocates and organizations in Case 173 known as the "foreign funding" case. In March, an investigative judge said that the investigations were closed and charges dropped for lack of evidence. In November, the judge also lifted eight-year-long asset freeze orders imposed on at least four prominent defenders. However, several of the former defendants still face harsh consequences including asset freezes. Nasser Amin and Hoda Abdelwahab, two prominent human rights defenders, remain arbitrarily banned from traveling abroad and continue to face SSSP investigations.

Independent organizations and advocacy work remain severely curtailed under the draconian restrictions of Egypt's 2019 NGO law. Prominent activists prosecuted in other arbitrary cases, such as Gasser Abdelrazek, continue to face travel bans and asset freezes without trial.

In mid-February 2024, several government and progovernment figures and entities engaged in an aggressive smear campaign on television, in newspapers, and social media against the Sinai Foundation for Human Rights, an independent group, and its director Ahmed Salem. Salem, a United Kingdom-based Egyptian human rights activist, said that he received threats through intermediaries close to Egyptian authorities that he "would be brought back to Egypt" if he did not drop his work. One of these threats, through a

government-appointed Sinai local clan leader, warned that Salem "is not far from reach even abroad."

Authorities continued to detain prominent critic and blogger Alaa Abdelfattah, who was unjustly sentenced to a five-year term that should have ended in October 2024. His lawyer said authorities refused to count the two years Abdelfattah spent in pretrial detention before the verdict, and plan to detain him until January 2027. He was previously sentenced in 2015 to a separate five-year term for participating in protests.

Authorities also continued to detain lawyer Houda Abdel Moneim, a former member of the National Council for Human Rights, despite her having served an unjust five-year sentence in October 2023. Instead of releasing her, the SSSP brought charges against her in a new case almost identical to the previous one against her, connected to the peaceful work of the Egyptian Coordination for Rights and Freedoms. This practice known as "recycling" or "rotation" is extensively used to keep critics in detention.

## Government Opposition

In February, an Egyptian court sentenced prominent politician Ahmed Tantawy, along with his campaign advisor and 21 of his detained supporters, to a year in prison for alleged offenses associated with his presidential challenge to President Sisi in the December 2023 election. The court also barred Tantawy from running for national elections for five years. The court ruling was entirely based on Tantawy's peaceful political activism and the efforts of Tantawy's campaign to collect support statements ahead of the election.

On May 27, authorities imprisoned Tantawy after an appeals court upheld the one-year sentence against him and nearly two dozen of his supporters and confirmed the ban on running in national elections.

## Justice System

Authorities continued to use abusive video conference systems to conduct remote hearings for pretrial detention renewal, without bringing detainees before a judge. This system severely undermines due process, preventing a judge from assessing the legality

and conditions of detention as well as the detainees' wellbeing. And it violates several fair trial guarantees including the right to legal counsel.

Parliament's Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Sub-Committee approved a draft law that would replace the 1950 Criminal Procedure Code (CPC), which would undermine already weakened fair trial rights and further empower abusive officials. The legislation fails to address Egyptian authorities' widespread use of arbitrary pre-trial detention and enforced disappearance, perpetuates impunity for law enforcement officials who violate human rights, and extends the powers of public prosecutors and law enforcement officers in a manner that could facilitate further violations of defendants' rights. It also expands the use of video conference systems to conduct remote hearings to involve all types of pretrial and trial hearings.

## Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

The government's economic approach, which prioritizes spending on large infrastructure projects including those led by the military, continues to undermine people's economic, social and cultural rights, particularly in light of the country's recurring economic crises, including skyrocketing prices of basic commodities, rising poverty, and reduced access to food and electricity.

From February 2024 onwards, Egypt's donors including the United Arab Emirates, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the United Kingdom and the European Union provided or pledged some US$57 billion in grants and loans. But this did little to help people in a country where nearly two-thirds of the population of over 100 million live in or near poverty, and the social security system provides only small cash transfers to around 21 million people.

Reforms undertaken in the context of different IMF programs also contributed to an increase in prices and a decrease in the value of cash assistance. Following Egypt's first IMF program in 2016, the national poverty rate reached almost 30 percent in 2019 and average consumer inflation reached 33.3 percent in 2024, undermining the right to food and an adequate standard of living. Egyptians faced rolling electricity blackouts this year amid an energy crisis. And the government has removed many food and fuel subsidies without sufficient measures to scale up the country's social security system and mitigate

the harm. Its spending levels on social protection, health, and education remain inadequate.

## Refugee and Migrant Rights

As of November 2024, Egypt hosted over 841,922 registered refugees and asylum seekers from 659countries, including some 565,000 people who fled the ongoing armed conflict in Sudan since April 2023. According to the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, the Egyptian government said it had received 1.2 million Sudanese people since April 2023, which may include unregistered asylum seekers and others who left Egypt to other countries. Between late 2023 and March 2024, Egyptian authorities arbitrarily arrested and unlawfully expelled thousands of Sudanese asylum seekers despite the risks of serious harm in Sudan, violating the principle of non-refoulement, according to reports by Amnesty International and others. According to UNHCR, access to public schools for refugee children "on equal footing to Egyptians" is only available to nationals of Sudan, South Sudan, Yemen, and Syria. However, even children of those nationalities face bureaucratic and other hurdles that deny them access to education.

# El Salvador

In February, President Nayib Bukele secured a landslide victory for a second term (2024-2029), despite a constitutional prohibition on immediate re-election. His party, Nuevas Ideas, secured a legislative supermajority in part thanks to favorable electoral reforms.

Since taking office in 2019, Bukele's administration has systematically dismantled democratic institutions and concentrated power in the executive branch. A state of emergency enacted in March 2022 remains in effect, suspending constitutional rights. Authorities have committed widespread abuses, including mass arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture and ill-treatment of detainees, and due process violations. Gang-related violence has markedly declined.

## Free and Fair Elections

In February, Nayib Bukele won a second term with over 80 percent of votes despite a constitutional ban on immediate reelection. Candidates of the ruling Nuevas Ideas party secured 54 of 60 of the Legislative Assembly seats. This landslide followed a 2021 ruling by the Supreme Court, which the Assembly had packed with allies, allowing Bukele to run for re-election.

An Organization of American States (OAS) observation mission that monitored the election raised concerns about the fairness of the process, citing uneven campaign financing, media access, and use of state resources. They also raised concerns about reforms that threatened judicial independence and about holding elections during a prolonged state of emergency.

Before the elections, the Legislative Assembly passed reforms that favored larger parties, making it easier for the ruling party to consolidate power. These changes included reducing Legislative Assembly seats from 84 to 60 and changes to the formula for the allocation of legislative seats. Additionally, the number of municipalities was cut from 262 to 44.

In September, the Legislative Assembly elected all five Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) judges for a five-year term. The opaque selection process and the apparent lack of independence of some elected judges raised alarms about the electoral authority's independence.

## Security Policies

A state of emergency adopted in March 2022 suspending certain basic rights, including due process protections, had been extended 30 times and remained in force at time of writing.

In 2022, the Assembly passed a set of criminal law amendments that increased the maximum prison sentence for the crime of "unlawful association" to 10 years for children aged 12 to 15, and up to 20 years for those aged 16 to 18. Subsequent legal changes have also allowed for mass trials and expanded the use of mandatory pretrial detention.

Under the state of emergency, police and soldiers have conducted hundreds of indiscriminate raids, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, arresting over 81,000 people, including more than 3,000 children. Authorities reported in August 2023 that 7,000 people had been released from prison since the start of the state of emergency.

Local and international human rights groups have documented mass arbitrary detention, torture, and, in some cases, sexual violence against women and girls in detention, and enforced disappearances. Authorities have not reported charging, indicting or convicting any police or military officers in connection with these abuses. In a September report, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), found "reports" of "widespread and systematic human rights violations" and urged authorities to "end the state of emergency."

Many detainees have no apparent connections to gang-related violence. Arrests often appear to be based on the detainees' appearance and anonymous complaints, rather than on evidence. Security forces routinely fail to present warrants or provide reasons for arrests. Many detentions appear to have been driven by a policy of "quotas" imposed by commanders of the National Civil Police.

Mass imprisonment has raised El Salvador's prison population to an estimated 108,000 detainees, exceeding the prison capacity by 38,000, and worsening already poor prison conditions. An alarming 1.7 percent of the country's population is now detained.

At least 261 detainees have died in prison during the state of emergency, Cristosal, a human rights group, reported in July. Attorney General Rodolfo Delgado said in June 2023 that 142 investigations into deaths in custody had been closed.

In January, El Salvador rejected a request for a visit by the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.

## Gang Violence

Gang violence has decreased significantly. For decades, gangs exerted territorial control over areas throughout the country, committing homicides, forced recruitment of children, rapes and sexual assaults, abductions, extortion, and displacement.

The country's longstanding high homicide rate, which peaked at 105 per 100,000 people in 2015, has sharply diminished since 2019, reaching a historic low in 2023, according to official figures. Extortion cases have also decreased, authorities reported.

Previous administrations alternated between secret gang negotiations and harsh security measures, both leading to renewed violence and rights violations.

Before the state of emergency, the Bukele administration reportedly negotiated with gangs, offering privileges for reduced homicides and electoral support. Failed talks with MS-13 gang allegedly triggered a March 2022 violence surge.

Some gang leaders who had been convicted and sentenced to prison in El Salvador were identified and arrested abroad. César Humberto López Larios, a high-ranking MS-13 leader, was captured in Mexico and extradited to the US in June. Elmer "Crook" Canales, another prominent MS-13 leader, was released while serving a 40-year sentence in El Salvador in November 2021, and allegedly escorted to Guatemala by a government official. A year later, Mexican authorities detained Canales and placed him under custody of US authorities, which had indicted him in 2020.

The media also reported that in November 2021, a prominent MS-13 leader, Elmer Canales, known as "Crook," was released from prison, where he was serving a 40-year sentence. He was reportedly escorted to Guatemala by a high-level government official. In November, Canales was detained by Mexican authorities and sent to the US where he was placed in custody.

## Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

According to government figures, 27 percent of El Salvador's population lived below the national income poverty line in 2023, an increase of 0.4 percent from 2022. Nearly 9 percent of the population lived in extreme poverty.

In 2023, Salvadorans aged 6 and above completed an average of 7.3 years of schooling, with significant disparities between rural areas (5.6 years) and urban areas (8.3 years). Additionally, 21.5 percent of Salvadorans aged 15 to 24 were neither employed nor in school in 2023. Among people aged 16 to 18, 30 percent were not attending school in 2023, a five percent decrease from 2022. Of those aged 60 and older, 28 percent could not read or write.

## Judicial Independence and Rule of Law

The Bukele administration has undermined the rule of law, including by packing the courts and approving legislative changes that expand government control over the judiciary.

In September, the Legislative Assembly elected seven new judges to the Supreme Court of Justice. Civil society organizations criticized lack of transparency in the process and raised concerns about the candidates' lack of independence.

The Public Defender's Office, which has long been overwhelmed with its caseload, faced layoffs. As of April, there were 281 public defenders, each representing an average of 281 cases resulting from the state of emergency. In September, 400 workers in the Public Defender's Office, including over 130 public defenders, were forced to resign.

In April, the Legislative Assembly moved forward with a reform to the constitutional amendment process. The reform allowed a single legislature to change the constitution with a three-quarters majority vote.

In January, lawmakers amended the Special Law Against Terrorism to grant the Attorney General the authority to add individuals and organizations to a "national terrorist list" without judicial oversight.

In May 2021, pro-Bukele lawmakers summarily removed and replaced the attorney general and all five judges of the Supreme Court's Constitutional Chamber. In September 2021, legislators passed laws allowing the Supreme Court and the attorney general to dismiss judges and prosecutors who are aged 60 and older. The new laws also expanded their powers to transfer all judges and prosecutors to new posts. The laws contradict international human rights standards on judicial independence and have been used to dismiss or transfer independent judges or prosecutors.

## Transparency and Anti-Corruption

El Salvador faces significant challenges in transparency, with the current administration severely restricting access to public information. According to Cristosal, over 73 percent of information requests are denied or ignored, while authorities' excessive classification of public interest information, burdensome filing requirements, and a weakened oversight institute hinder access. This lack of transparency enables potential corruption and limits citizen oversight.

El Salvador's score on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, which measures perceived public sector corruption globally, has fallen sharply from 36 in 2020 to a 12-year low of 31 in 2023.

The Supreme Court has classified President Bukele's asset declaration, departing from previous practice. According to an investigation by the news outlets Redacción Regional, Focos and Dromómanos, Bukele and his family acquired 363 hectares of land during his first presidential term. Another investigation by the same media outlets revealed that Bukele's brother and chief advisor, Karim Bukele, purchased a building in San Salvador's

historic center for US$1.3 million just three months after the Legislative Assembly passed a law exempting investors in that area from taxes.

## Freedoms of Expression and Association

The government has created a hostile environment for journalists, union leaders, and civil society activists. Officials have attempted to discredit the work of journalists and civil society organizations, including by labeling them as "gang defenders."

In October, police harassed and intimidated the mother of independent journalist Ricardo Vaquerano following the publication of an investigation in Gato Encerrado media outlet about a network of police officers linked to hundreds of murders.

In October, teacher and union leader Idalia Zúniga was dismissed after participating in a protest against proposed US$121 million cuts to the 2025 budgets of the health and education ministries. As of November, 74 people had been dismissed, most from the Health Ministry; many reportedly after participating in protests.

In September, a news outlet revealed audio recordings of Alejandro Muyshondt, a former Bukele national security advisor who died in custody in February under circumstances that have not been adequately investigated. Muyshondt and Ernesto Castro, then-Bukele's private secretary, were heard discussing plans to spy on journalists, news outlets, and political opponents.

The Association of Journalists of El Salvador (APES) reported 311 "press freedom violations" during 2023, including digital harassment, stigmatizing statements targeting journalists, and restrictions on journalists' work and access to public information. Between March and May, APES reported 50 press freedom violations.

Between January 2022 and August 2024, five journalists went into exile fearing reprisals for their work, while sixteen others left the country temporarily, according to APES.

## Access to Abortion

El Salvador criminalizes abortion under all circumstances. For years courts have also

convicted women who have suffered abortions or obstetric emergencies on charges of qualified homicide and sentenced them with up to 50 years in prison. The last woman serving a prison sentence for qualified homicide was released last November, following advocacy by feminist organizations. As of January, there were 11 women being prosecuted for abortion-related crimes.

In March 2023, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights held a hearing on the case of Beatriz, who was denied abortion by El Salvador in 2013 despite her high-risk pregnancy. The ruling remained pending at time of writing.

## Gender and Sexuality

In February, the Health Ministry ordered the removal of all official material that referred to "sexual diversity" and "LGTBI" People. This reportedly included information related to sexually transmitted infections and medical forms that previously allowed for patients to indicate their gender identity. The Education Ministry also ordered the removal of all material related to "gender ideology," a catch-all and vague term often used to discredit the rights of women and LGBT people.

In May, the new Legislative Assembly eliminated several specialized legislative commissions, including its Commission on Women and Gender Equality, in existence since 2009.

El Salvador does not allow same-sex marriage or legal gender recognition for transgender people and lacks comprehensive anti-LGBT discrimination legislation. The legislature continues to ignore a 2022 Supreme Court order to create a legal gender recognition procedure that would allow trans people to change their names on identity documents.

# Eritrea

The Eritrean government maintained an iron grip on its population at home and abroad. It continued to repress the population's human rights, including freedom of opinion, religion, and expression, and forced some children and much of its adult population into indefinite military/national service. Abroad, Eritrean forces committed ongoing abuses in Ethiopia's Tigray region and the government further restricted its citizens' rights.

Eritrea has had no elections since independence in 1993, and the unelected president, Isaias Afewerki, in power since independence, has not implemented a plebiscite-approved 1997 constitution guaranteeing civil rights and limiting executive power. Since 2010, no legislature has met. No political party except the Isaias-controlled People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) has been allowed to exist.

Unlawful detentions and enforced disappearances, notably of perceived critics, government officials, journalists, and alleged draft evaders, is widespread. In August, the former minister of finance, detained incommunicado since 2018 after he published a book calling for democratic reforms, died in detention.

The government also severely restricted religious freedoms and unlawfully detained individuals of 'non-recognized faiths,' including children.

The government has intimidated Eritreans in the diaspora, resulting in increasing polarization between government supporters and opposition which on occasion resulted in violent clashes.

Eritreans continued to flee repression only to face deteriorating conditions in neighboring countries. In Sudan, where hundreds of thousands of Eritreans sought refuge before the country's conflict, Eritrean refugees have faced violence, and abuses, including sexual violence. Similarly, in Ethiopia, Eritrean refugees continued to face abuses in the conflict-affected Amhara region.

Eritrean forces still occupy parts of Ethiopia's Tigray region where they continue to commit sexual violence, abduct civilians, and pillage livestock.

Despite being a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council(UNHRC), Eritrea refused to cooperate with key international and regional rights mechanisms, including by denying access to the UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea and ignoring the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) decisions, and UN treaty body recommendations, including the human rights committee and committee on rights of the child. In July, the UNHRC renewed the special rapporteur's mandate.

## Indefinite Military/National Service, Forced Labor

The Eritrean government pursued its uniquely abusive policy of indefinite military, national service, to control its population.

Although Eritrean law sets the duration of national service at 18 months, in practice, since the government declared a state of emergency in 1998, mandatory service has been extended indefinitely, as a result, most Eritreans serve for years, some for decades, with paltry pay and arbitrary punishments. The length of service is random, with no clear criteria governing its duration.

The government once again sent final year of secondary school students, including children, to the Warsai Yekalo Secondary School, located in the Sawa military camp, pushing them into military service before completing secondary school, with a devastating impact on their education.

The UN special rapporteur on Eritrea received ongoing reports of conditions and punishments in military/national service that may amount to inhumane, degrading treatment, and torture. The rapporteur said that the circumstances of the work in service amount to forced labor.

## Unlawful Detentions, Enforced Disappearances

Due process rights continue to be systematically violated in Eritrea. Political cases are handled extrajudicially. Detainees are subjected to arbitrary and prolonged detention without charges or trials, and are denied basic legal rights, including judicial review.

Arrests are frequently made without warrants or notification of charges, and many Eritreans, notably perceived dissidents, government critics, human rights defenders, religious leaders, and journalists, are subjected to enforced disappearance for years or even decades. Some are held in solitary confinement in undisclosed locations, while others are thought to have been killed or died in detention. In August, the former finance minister and critic of the president, Berhane Abrehe, who had been held incommunicado since September 2018 died in jail. The fate of 11 former senior government officials known as the G-15, and 10 independent journalists arrested since September 2001 remains unknown. Family members have never been allowed to visit them.

## Freedom of Religion

Religious repression in Eritrea persists. Religious leaders and Christians affiliated with both the officially recognized and "unrecognized" faiths continue to face unlawful detentions and other abuses linked to their beliefs.

A religious freedom organization reported the arrests between January and May of at least 110 Christians including children. Since 1993, the government has arrested and imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses without trial or formal charges. Security forces raided a home in September and arrested 24 people. Three days later, an 85-year-old female Witness who lived in the home was arrested. According to a religious freedom organization, 63 Witnesses remain imprisoned solely for their faith, including 10, aged 70 and above. The UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea reported that children who are Jehovah's Witnesses are intimidated and on occasion expelled from school for refusing to take part in nationalistic ceremonies.

## Freedom of Expression and Association

Civic space in Eritrea remains closed with no opposition parties, independent civic organizations, or media. The government continues its systematic repression of dissent, routinely subjecting real or perceived critics to arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances. The government controls the domestic media. Independent media have been banned since September 2001. Nongovernmental gatherings of over 7 persons are prohibited.

The UN special rapporteur on Eritrea reported on increased transnational repression, with the suppression of dissent in the diaspora by Eritrean authorities, including through intimidation, online harassment, and the refusal of consular services. This contributed to greater mobilization of opposition groups, and polarization which has on occasion led to violent incidents and clashes between government supporters and opponents in several cities around the world over the past two years, including in the Netherlands.

## Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

In Eritrea only 21 percent of women and girls could access the modern forms of contraceptives they desired, one of the lowest rates in Africa. The maternal mortality rate (MMR) in the country stands at 322 deaths per 100,000 live births, almost 5 times the rate promoted in the Sustainable Development Goals. A recent study attributed this to preventable causes including access and quality of antenatal care; poor referral mechanisms; and complications arising from unsafe abortion.

## Violence against women and girls

Eritrea failed to sufficiently tackle ongoing violence against women and girls. Child marriage is prevalent with 13 percent of girls married by the age of 15, and 41 percent by age 18. Contributing factors include the National laws that define the age of marriage as 18 years but allow for girls aged 16 years and above to get dispensation, social and cultural norms and a high prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM). The UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea documented ongoing sexual harassment and sexual violence against female conscripts in a context of impunity.

## Refugees and Returnees

Eritrean asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants, including unaccompanied children, continue to suffer arbitrary detention, secondary displacement, and violence in host countries. Over three decades since independence, about half a million Eritreans (roughly 15 percent of an estimated 3.8 million population) have fled.

As of June 2024, over 150,000 Eritreans were registered as refugees in Sudan, many residing in camps in southeastern Sudan. In Sudan's capital Khartoum in Rapid Support

Forces (RSF) controlled areas, women and girls including Eritrean and other refugees have been faced with widespread sexual violence.

In Ethiopia, over 170,000 Eritreans were registered as refugees as of May 2024. During the year, Eritrean refugees faced violent incidents and insecurity in camps in the conflict-affected Amhara region, according to media reports. Since 2021, newly arriving Eritrean asylum seekers have been denied access to asylum procedures due to Ethiopia's suspension of asylum claim registrations, documentation issuance, and refugee status determinations.

## Eritrean forces in Ethiopia

Eritrean forces remained in Ethiopia's Tigray region throughout 2024, where they continued to commit serious abuses. Eritrean soldiers have subjected women and girls to widespread sexual violence while reports of disappearances of men and looting of livestock in areas under Eritrean control persist.

# Eswatini

In 2024, Eswatini's human rights record deteriorated, as civic space, judicial independence, and the rule of law remain under threat. The authorities have yet to apprehend the killers of human rights lawyer and opposition activist Thulani Maseko, who was shot in his home in January 2023. There is no indication that the government has undertaken or is prepared to undertake a credible investigation into Maseko's killing. The rights of women and girls remain a concern as incidences of brutal intimate partner violence, rape, and femicide persisted throughout the year.

## Civil and Political Rights

The authorities in Eswatini have failed to implement long overdue democratic reforms in the absolute monarchy. In power since 1986, King Mswati III maintained control over the executive, parliament and judiciary in 2024. On January 21, 2023, the King, during a public address, warned those calling for democratic reforms that mercenaries would deal with them. The king accused pro-democracy activists of causing instability in the country. Hours after that warning, Thulani Maseko, a human rights lawyer and activist was fatally shot and killed at his home in the presence of his wife and children.

Eswatini received a score of 17 out of 100 in Freedom House's Freedom in the World 2024 report. It scored 1 out of 40 on political freedoms and 16 out of 60 for civil liberties, with a conclusion that Eswatini was "not free." The country's score has been consistently low for years, correlating with its entrenched culture of impunity for human rights violations.

## Conduct of Security Forces

The authorities have yet to hold anyone to account for the scores of activists killed, and the hundreds injured by security forces during the 2021 crackdown against pro-democracy demonstrations. Instead, the government has escalated its clamp down on dissenting views by arresting government critics on spurious charges, hindering peaceful assembly, and resisting longstanding calls for democratic reforms.

## Subversion of the Rule of Law

In addition to the lack of an investigation into Maseko's killing, the authorities have targeted and harassed his widow, who has been calling for justice and accountability for her husband's death.

On July 15, a court in Eswatini sentenced two former members of parliament, Mduduzi Bacede Mabuza and Mthandeni Dube, to prison terms of 25 and 18 years, respectively. Both were initially arrested in 2021 for participating in and supporting pro-democracy protests, and remained in pretrial detention since then. In June 2023, the duo was found guilty of all the bogus charges against them, including terrorism, sedition, and murder under the 2008 Suppression of Terrorism Act (STA) as well as the 1938 Sedition and Subversive Activities Act (SSA). The hefty sentences handed to Mabuza and Dube highlight the lack of impartiality and independence of the judiciary. This is compounded by the lack of accountability and justice for the serious violations committed by law enforcement, including during the 2021 protests.

On August 13, Eswatini's Supreme Court overturned a 2016 High Court decision that declared several repressive provisions of the STA and SSA invalid. The 2016 High Court decision had declared that several sections of the SSA and STA violated the rights to freedom of association, expression, and assembly, guaranteed in Eswatini's Constitution and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, to which Eswatini is party.

The 2016 High Court decision combined four separate applications brought by six activists. The activists, who included the late Thulani Maseko, Mario Masuku, leader of the banned People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO), and Maxwell Dlamini, leader of PUDEMO's youth wing, had been separately charged under the SSA for allegedly making subversive statements and sedition. They had also been charged under the STA for allegedly "chanting slogans of a terrorism nature," "wearing t-shirts which bore terrorist demands at the back," and participating in a demonstration calling for a boycott of elections. The activists argued that the STA, which criminalizes support for a proscribed entity and prevented individuals from challenging that label, infringed on their right to due process and administrative justice.

The Supreme Court's decision to overturn the High Court's ruling will embolden the government to ramp up its crackdown on opposition, human rights, and pro-democracy activists and weaponize the criminal justice system. This ruling is the latest in a worrying trend of authorities employing vague and overly broad provisions of terrorism laws to suppress freedom of association, expression, and assembly.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

Gender inequality, violence against women and girls, and cultural norms that marginalize women and girls remain a concern in Eswatini. For example, in May, data from Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA) revealed that a total of 260 cases of gender-based violence (GBV) were reported that month, some reports were made directly to SWAGAA, while others were reported to the police, Department of Social Welfare, health facilities, and other partners. Around 85 per cent of reported cases took place in the home by perpetrators known to the victim. From January to May, SWAGAA recorded 1,172 GBV cases, with emotional abuse being the most prevalent form of abuse experienced by victims and female adults accounting for the majority of cases. Underreporting of abuse is common, so there may be many more cases.

On a positive note, the country has passed some progressive laws and policies, including the 2023-2027 National Strategy to End Violence in Eswatini. The government has however failed to establish a funding mechanism for the 2018 Sexual Offenses and Domestic Violence Act (SODVA), to secure coordination among relevant government departments, ensure expedited sexual violence trials, or provide enough support and shelter for victims and survivors. The first government shelter for survivors of violence against women and girls only opened in 2021.

In 2024, the global Gender Gap Index for Eswatini recorded an index of 0.74. This index quantifies the gap between women and men in four key areas: health, education, economy, and politics and gives them a score from zero to one. A score of one indicates full equality between women and men, and a score of zero indicates full inequality. According to the Women in Parliament 2023 report, Eswatini recorded the highest progress in women's representation in parliament among countries that held elections in 2023, with a 20-percentage-point increase of women in its upper chamber, the Senate. Overall, Eswatini ranked third at 14.4 percent for both upper and lower houses.

# Ethiopia

The human rights situation in Ethiopia remained dire, with government forces, militias, and non-state armed groups committing serious abuses in conflict-affected areas and elsewhere throughout the country.

Fighting between the Ethiopian military and militias in the Amhara region resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths and injuries, including attacks against refugees and civilian infrastructure such as hospitals. The government renewed a sweeping state of emergency for the Amhara region, but its provisions were applied throughout Ethiopia; mass arrests persisted once it expired.

Authorities harassed, surveilled, and detained journalists, human rights defenders, and outspoken figures, creating an increasingly hostile and restrictive reporting environment.

Impunity for human rights abuses remained the norm. While the government developed a transitional justice policy, accountability efforts for past and ongoing abuses have been inadequate and lacked transparency and independent oversight. Ethiopia's international partners continued to normalize their relationships with the Ethiopian government with little regard for ongoing abuses.

Consensual same-sex relationships are outlawed and carry a penalty of up to 15 years in prison.

Ethiopia grappled with soaring inflation and rising external debt. In January, the United Arab Emirates pledged US$2.4 billion investment, and in July agreed to a bilateral currency swap. That same month, the World Bank approved US$1.5 billion in direct budget support, while the government secured a US$3.4 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund as part of an economic reform program. Authorities announced policies aimed at gradually eliminating fuel subsidies, while lawmakers considered a proposal to expand the value-added tax law to include transportation services, water, and electricity.

Ethiopia's relationship with Somalia and Eritrea grew increasingly strained after the government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Somaliland, which Somalia considers part of its territory.

## Conflict and Abuses

The armed conflict between the Ethiopian military and Fano militia in the Amhara region continued throughout 2024, with warring parties committing war crimes and other serious abuses.

In Amhara, government forces carried out extrajudicial executions, sexual violence, torture, and ill-treatment against civilians, and used drones and heavy artillery against civilians, according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Fano militias were also responsible for killings of civilians, attacks on civilian objects, and unlawful arrests.

On January 29, Ethiopian military forces summarily killed dozens of civilians and carried out other war crimes in Merawi town, marking one of the deadliest incidents since the outbreak of the conflict in August 2023. On February 24, military forces again killed civilians in Merawi following another Fano attack in the town.

Media reported a February 19 apparent drone strike on a truck transporting civilians in Amhara, which killed at least 30 people and left more wounded. Government strikes in Amhara reportedly continued in October.

Ethiopian forces also committed widespread attacks amounting to war crimes against medical professionals, patients, and health facilities in the Amhara region. Soldiers beat, arbitrarily arrested, and intimidated medical professionals. Soldiers also unlawfully attacked medical transports and interfered with the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

International humanitarian presence remained deeply constrained in Amhara, where the UN faced the highest incidents of violence in the country. Since January, eight aid workers have been killed. In October, media reported that the UN was considering suspending relief operations in Amhara due to attacks on aid workers.

In Tigray, Eritrean government forces committed rape and sexual violence against women and girls, and abducted, and pillaged civilian property in areas they occupied.

Communities across the country experienced a sharp rise in kidnappings for ransom, with authorities failing to address the crisis. In July, kidnappers in Oromia reportedly abducted more than 100 people, mostly university students travelling from the Amhara region.

## Freedoms of Expression, Media, and Association

On February 2, Ethiopia's parliament extended the state of emergency in the Amhara region, initially enacted in August 2023, by an additional four months.

Under the law, authorities carried out mass arrests without a warrant and enabled numerous restrictions on people's movement and communication. Authorities targeted journalists and politicians critical of the government's actions in Amhara. On January 31, Ethiopian security forces arrested Dessalegn Chanie, a member of parliament representing the opposition party, the National Movement of the Amhara (NAMA). Authorities released Dessalegn on March 14. The state of emergency expired in June.

In late September, security forces carried out a new wave of mass arbitrary arrests in Amhara, where hundreds of people, including senior police and national intelligence members, as well as journalists, academics, lawyers, and civil servants were detained according to Amnesty International. On February 22, security officers detained Batte Urgessa, a member of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), an opposition party, and French journalist Antoine Galindo, as they met in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. Following an international outcry, Antoine Galindo was released on February 29, while Batte remained detained until March 6. On April 10, Batte was murdered in his hometown in the Oromia region. In the ensuing days, local police announced the arrest of 13 suspects to the killing, including Batte's younger brother, Millo. Authorities detained Millo for eight months, despite court orders calling for his release.

Ethiopian security and intelligence forces intimidated, harassed, and threatened prominent Ethiopian human rights organizations, forcing several rights defenders into exile. On May 23, security officials visited the Addis Ababa offices of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), in search of information, and threatened two staff members in the

process. On April 6, 2024, two security force personnel came to the home of an EHRCO staff member and warned them to cease their human rights work or face consequences.

In mid-November, the Ethiopian Authority for Civil Society Organizations (ACSO), a government body that oversees civil society groups, suspended the Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD), the Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia (AHRE), and Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR), forcing the organizations to cease their work. Ethiopian authorities lifted the suspension on December 11.

Media remained under a government stranglehold, with many journalists having to choose between self-censorship, harassment and arrest, or exile. In June, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that 54 journalists and media workers had fled the country since 2020.

Authorities resumed mobile-internet services in several cities in Amhara in July after year-long disruptions of communications. After hostilities escalated in September, authorities once again cut mobile internet services, hampering communications and real-time reporting.

## Due Process and Fair Trial Rights

Authorities detained critics and journalists for prolonged periods without charge. In June, authorities released journalists Belay Manaye, Bekalu Alamirew, and Tewodros Zerfu, and opposition figure Sintayehu Chekol after several months in detention. Authorities had held Belay and Bekalu in different detention sites, including Awash Arba military camp, under harsh detention conditions.

Amhara journalists and opposition politicians, including Christian Tadele and Yohannes Buayalew, among others, whom authorities detained as part of a broader crackdown in August 2023, remained in detention.

On September 5, the government released seven senior Oromo political opposition figures, whom authorities arbitrarily detained for four years without charge and ignored multiple court orders calling for their release.

In April, media reported that authorities demolished homes and evicted thousands of residents in the capital with little warning and at times with no compensation.

## Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees

In February, Ethiopian authorities facilitated the return of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Amhara to their areas of origin in Oromia in a manner that aid agencies found did not align with international IDP return principles.

In Tigray, the UN reported tens of thousands of people displaced to the neighboring Amhara region, following armed clashes in Alamata town in mid-April.

Conflict and unrest in Amhara also impacted refugees. Local militias and gunmen subjected Sudanese refugees in Awlala and Kumer camps to killings, beatings, looting, and forced labor. On August 21, Ethiopian soldiers, police, and local militia beat and separated Sudanese refugees, returning several hundred to Sudan in a process that did not meet international standards. Between September 1 and 8, Ethiopian federal forces clashed with Fano, an Amhara armed group, in and around these camps, putting refugees at risk.

## Barriers to Education

In November 2023, the Ministry of Education published a draft directive requiring students to return to school within 15 days of giving birth or be suspended for the academic year. Women's rights organizations criticized the directive for undermining girls' rights to education and adequate maternity leave.

In April, the UN said continued hostilities in Amhara and the impact of the conflict in northern Ethiopia forced the closure of 4,178 schools in Amhara. The region's education bureau reported that enrollment dropped to two million out of a target of seven million. Warring parties in Amhara and in Tigray also occupied and used schools for military purposes.

## Accountability and Justice

In April, the government approved a nation-wide transitional justice policy, after a year-long consultation process that was criticized by victims, political opposition groups, and civil society actors over the lack of transparency and the inclusiveness of the consultations, and the timeliness of the discussion while fighting was ongoing.

Ethiopian authorities continued to deny or downplay allegations that it committed abuses against civilians, casting doubt on its commitment to hold its forces and Eritrean soldiers to account for grave crimes.

At the March and September Human Rights Council sessions, the European Union delivered joint statements, supported by more than 40 UN members, which affirmed the importance of a credible transitional justice and accountability process with the March statement saying it should include an international component. In September, the United States extended its executive order that established a sanctions regime for human rights abuses and other actions in northern Ethiopia.

In March, Ethiopian authorities dropped all charges "for the sake of public interest," and released Abdi Mohamoud Omar, also known as Abdi Illey, the former president of Ethiopia's Somali region after he served more than five years in prison. Authorities never brought charges against him for decades of abusive rule.

In June, a UN inter-agency report evaluating the aid response to the conflict in northern Ethiopia found systemic failures by UN agencies to overcome government restrictions, abide by humanitarian principles, meet essential needs and protect communities, including from sexual violence in its response.

# European Union

There is a gap between the rhetoric of the European Union on human rights and the often inadequate and sometimes abusive laws and practices of member states. The gap is particularly stark when it comes to migration and asylum policies, tackling racism, and protecting the rule of law.

## Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers

EU migration and asylum policy increasingly focuses on deadly deterrence, illustrated in 2024 by new rules that seriously undermine the rights of migrants and asylum seekers arriving at EU borders and intensified efforts to offshore responsibilities to countries outside the EU.

The EU Migration and Asylum Pact, adopted in May, includes provisions that, once implemented, will severely curtail rights. New rules will make it harder for people to apply for asylum and easier for governments to rush decisions on asylum applications and will increase detention at EU borders. EU countries will be able to deny people the right to apply for asylum in vaguely defined situations of "mass influx" or "instrumentalization" of migration by third countries. The changes encourage EU states to return people to transit countries outside the EU where they could face abuse or chain refoulement. The pact does little to improve responsibility-sharing among EU countries. In October, 17 EU member states signed a non-paper calling for a new legislative proposal to increase returns.

In 2024, the EU announced new migration partnerships with Egypt and Mauritania and increased border management funding to both countries as well as to Lebanon, following a 2023 deal with Tunisia and ongoing migration control support to Libyan and Moroccan authorities, without genuine human rights guarantees. The EU pursued these partnerships despite widespread atrocities against migrants and refugees in Libya, and abuses and lack of protections faced by migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Mauritania, and Morocco. The EU largely failed to speak up against migrant rights violations in countries with which it has such partnerships.

Italy and Malta, with support from Frontex aircraft, continued to facilitate interceptions of boats carrying migrants and refugees by Libyan forces and their return to the risk of serious abuse. With support from the European Commission, Tunisia declared a Search and Rescue Region in June that risks increasing interceptions and returns to abuse in Tunisia rather than improving protection of life and safety at sea.

The EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) found that widespread rights violations at EU borders—failure to assist migrants in distress, mistreatment, and abuse—are not properly investigated. The agency called for robust monitoring at borders and stronger accountability mechanisms. The European Ombudsman said Frontex needed clear guidelines for assessing maritime emergencies and issuing mayday relays for boats in distress and called for an independent commission of inquiry into deaths in the Mediterranean Sea. In October, EU leaders expressed support for Poland after it announced it would suspend access to asylum at the Belarus border, a decision that could breach international and EU law.

Numerous EU countries expressed interest in or endorsed measures to offshore responsibility for asylum seekers. In October and November, Italy transferred the first two groups to Albania under a deal by which men from countries deemed "safe" and rescued or intercepted by Italy at sea are taken to Albania for processing of their asylum claims. The future of the deal was uncertain after an Italian court ordered both groups released because their home countries cannot categorically be deemed safe and referred the issue to the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU). The CJEU had ruled in early October that a country cannot be considered safe if there are exceptions.

Germany's migration commissioner suggested in September that Germany could send certain people to Rwanda, while the Danish immigration minister visited Australia and Nauru, also in September, to learn more about Australia's abusive offshore processing policy. In May, 15 EU member states asked the European Commission to explore ways to shift asylum processing outside the EU including by making it easier to send people to "safe third countries."

Statistics revealed shifting migration routes, with significant increases in arrivals in Spain's Canary Islands as well as along eastern EU land borders and a drop in crossings in the Mediterranean and through the Western Balkans. During the first nine months of 2024,

the International Organization for Migration (IOM) recorded at least 1,452 people dead or missing in the Mediterranean and over 700 in the Atlantic route to the Canaries.

## Discrimination and Intolerance

In 2024, European governments expressed concern about the rise of far-right parties—even as mainstream parties emulated their policies and rhetoric—as well as rising levels of racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance. The political environment ahead of EU elections in June saw increased mainstreaming of racist, Islamophobic, anti-migrant, and far-right narratives.

This happened while the impacts of the Hamas-led attack in Israel on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing hostilities between Israel and Palestinian armed forces led to an "alarming surge" in Europe of hatred against Jews and Muslims and those perceived as such.

In July, the FRA published its third survey on discrimination and hate crimes against Jews in the EU, which pre-dated October 7. It illustrated Jews' experiences and perceptions of "high levels of antisemitism" in Europe.

In October, the FRA published "Being Muslim in the EU," a report based on a survey in 13 EU countries asking Muslims about their experience of discrimination, including hate crimes and mistreatment by police. Nearly half of survey respondents said they had experienced racism.

During 2024, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and its European Commission against Racism and Intolerance added their voices to international concerns about increased antisemitic and anti-Muslim hatred. In October, the EU Council adopted a declaration on fostering Jewish life and combating antisemitism, stressing the importance of education and protection for victims of all forms of antisemitism, racism, and other forms of hatred.

FRA's 2024 annual report found overall intolerance "growing across Europe, affecting many groups, including Muslims, people of African descent, Roma, and migrants," noting that "[d]isinformation and online platforms have exacerbated racist and polarised attitudes." A

FRA survey found one in three LGBT people reported experiencing discrimination, while ILGA-Europe noted an uptick in anti-LGBT rhetoric around elections across Europe.

The EU continues to lack a dedicated age equality strategy to tackle age discrimination.

In March, the Council of Europe, which includes all EU states, adopted a Gender Equality Strategy for 2024-2029, including on violence against and equal access to justice for women and girls and their participation in political, public, social, and economic life.

In May, the EU adopted a directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence. The directive includes measures to prevent, protect, and increase access to justice for survivors of violence against women, but it does not adopt a consent-based definition for rape at EU level. Nor does it recognize forced sterilization as a crime. Forced sterilization disproportionately affects women and girls with disabilities and remains legal in at least 12 EU member states, including Bulgaria, Denmark, and Portugal.

In May, the Council of the European Union adopted a new directive setting out minimum standards to improve member state implementation of national and EU anti-discrimination laws.

In September, the European Commission presented its report on the implementation of the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020-2025. According to the Commission, 11 EU member states adopted dedicated national action plans against racism, but challenges remain even in those states due to insufficient funds for implementation and failure to disaggregate data by racial and ethnic origin to inform policies.

In July, reappointed European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen announced that a new anti-racism strategy would be developed for the Commission's 2024-2029 term. In September, Von der Leyen also announced that work on equality and non-discrimination would be folded into the mandate of the Commissioner on preparedness and crisis management—a downgrade given that equality previously had a dedicated Commissioner. In December, Von der Leyen upgraded the coordinators on antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred, giving them direct access to Commission president's office, yet neglected to do the same for the anti-racism coordinator.

## Poverty and Inequality

EU data from June 2024 showed that 94.6 million people (21.4 percent of the population) were "at risk of poverty or social exclusion" during 2023, of whom 29.3 million experienced severe material or social deprivation. Women remain disproportionately affected.

Poverty and social exclusion rates in Romania, Bulgaria, the two worst affected EU states, exceeded 30 percent, and remained above 25 percent in Greece, Spain, and Latvia, the next three most affected.

By August, as energy prices dropped easing the cost of living crisis, the EU-wide inflation average fell to 2.2 percent.

European governments and intergovernmental authorities publicly reiterated commitment to greater implementation and realization of "social rights," including rights protected under the Council of Europe's European Social Charter in the Vilnius declaration in February, and issues falling under the EU's European Pillar of Social Rights in the La Hulpe declaration in April.

Results of an EU-wide survey published in April showed that 88 percent of Europeans consider social rights, such as adequate standard of living, working conditions, and health care, to be important.

In January, the European Commission published its monitoring framework for the European Child Guarantee. This 2021 EU-wide policy instrument, focused on tackling child poverty, requires states to ensure by 2030 free access to early childhood education and care, one free healthy meal each school day, health care, and housing for all children facing social exclusion or other disadvantage. Children's rights groups drew attention to the scale of the challenge, noted patchy implementation and monitoring of national plans by governments, and called for better data collection.

A 2024 UNICEF-commissioned assessment of two decades of European Roma inclusion and children's rights strategies called on EU authorities and national governments to tailor

the European Child Guarantee to include urgent focused measures to address Roma child poverty.

A 2024 report by the European Commission and the Social Protection Committee, an EU advisory body, drew attention to the persistent gender pension gap (a 26 percent gap in pension income between men and women in 2022), arising from unequal pay and employment, and women more likely to take career breaks or work part-time, including for caring responsibilities. Civil society groups urged more uniform pension credit systems to address disparities, drawing particular attention to high levels of poverty among women older than 75.

In July, the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive entered into force, requiring large companies to prevent and remedy human rights abuses in their supply chains. In December, the EU published banning products made with forced labor from sale in the EU.

## Rule of Law

European Union institutions continued to focus on rule of law and democratic institutions in member states, including through the creation of a new Commissioner post for Democracy, Justice and Rule of Law, but concrete actions to address the most serious concerns fell short.

Scrutiny of Hungary continued under article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the EU treaty instrument to address serious breaches to the rule of law with dialogue and possible sanctions. The EU Council held its seventh hearing on Hungary but despite "persistent serious deficiencies" in most areas raised in the European Parliament's 2018 action that triggered the procedure, EU states failed to issue recommendations to the Hungarian government or to hold a vote on whether Hungary was at risk of a serious breach of EU values.

In March, the European Parliament brought an action against the Commission in the Court of Justice of the EU asking the court to review the legality of the Commission's December 2023 decision that Hungary had met benchmarks linked to judicial independence and could access up to €10.2 billion in EU cohesion funds. The EUCJ had yet to rule at this writing.

The European Commission in February opened an infringement procedure and in October referred Hungary to the EUCJ over its Defense of National Sovereignty Act (see Hungary chapter) for violating EU law.

The European Commission and several member states in July announced a partial boycott of the Hungarian Presidency of the Council over Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's travel to Moscow to meet with Russian President and indicated ICC suspect Vladimir Putin.

In May, the European Commission decided to terminate the Article 7 procedure against Poland despite its newly elected government not having implemented all needed reforms. The hurried decision was primarily based on "commitments" by Poland's government, which came to power in December 2023.

In a first of its kind rule of law resolution on Greece, the European Parliament in February raised concern over media freedom, abusive lawsuits and surveillance of journalists, treatment of migrants, and attacks on human rights defenders. The resolution called on the Commission to assess Greece's fulfillment of its fundamental rights obligations for access to EU funds.

The 2024 EU Rule of Law annual report highlighted the essential role of civil society organizations but failed to identify intimidation and interference with their work in France, Greece, Italy, Hungary, Germany, and elsewhere as a core challenge. Against the backdrop of mounting evidence of restrictions on civic space, authorities in some European countries appeared to also restrict freedom of expression and assembly disproportionately for pro-Palestine protesters and climate protestors.

Risks of stigmatization of foreign-funded civil society groups grew with new initiatives for foreign-influence style legislation in some EU member states and as the EU continued to discuss a proposed directive on transparency of interest representation on behalf of third countries. A September opinion by UN experts stated that the EU directive could have a chilling effect on civil society and unduly restrict freedoms of expression, assembly and association protected under international human rights law.

The EU AI Act was approved in May 2024 and marks seminal progress in regulating AI and related technologies. It included a ban on social scoring, limitations on remote biometric surveillance technologies, and mandated human rights risk assessments for 'high risk' uses. However, it also included significant loopholes for national security, law enforcement and border policing, and prioritized company liability risks over human rights risks. Many European Parliament members reported being targeted with spyware in 2024. The EU has yet to take steps to reign in the development, sale, and use of this technology.

# France

Snap parliamentary elections in 2024 saw increased racist and xenophobic rhetoric. Government-imposed constraints on civil society impacted the ability of nongovernmental groups to perform their role. Nationwide indicators showed a rise in hate crimes against minority populations as well as widening economic inequality across French society. The Olympic Games, while showcasing France globally, saw abuses against people living on the streets and use of intrusive surveillance technology raising privacy and discrimination concerns. Migrants and asylum-seekers faced dire conditions.

## Rule of Law

France's 2021 "separatism" law continues to chill freedoms of association and expression, particularly for environmental, anti-discrimination, and human rights groups. Measures including the "Contract of Republican Engagement" impose stringent requirements on organizations, forcing them to affirm their commitment to secularism and republican values.

The European Commission's July 2024 Rule of Law report underscored these concerns, highlighting problems with the granting and withdrawal of public subsidies to nongovernmental organizations. The UN Human Rights Committee echoed these concerns in November.

The Defender of Rights, France's ombudsperson institution, cautioned against increasing restrictions on freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.

The UN special rapporteur on environmental defenders reported on France's crackdown on environmental activists, citing excessive police force, restrictive bans, and misuse of anti-terrorism laws.

The European Commission criticized France's use of accelerated legislative procedures, limiting democratic debate.

Press freedom groups condemned violations after journalists investigating French arms sales to Israel and environmental issues were arrested in June and July.

## Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

In January 2024, Oxfam France noted widening economic inequalities in France, citing a November 2023 report by France's National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). The INSEE report showed the standard of living decreased for the poorest 90 percent of the French population and increased for the richest 10 percent in 2022.

In April, authorities resumed destruction of informal settlements in France's poorest overseas department, Mayotte, following a 2023 operation which prejudicially associated irregular migration with crime and disease. Neither operation addressed pressing social needs in Mayotte.

The right to housing is regressing throughout France, according to a housing rights organization and the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH).

## Discrimination and Intolerance

The lead-up to snap parliamentary elections in June, called by President Macron after his party's defeat and the far-right National Rally success in June European Parliament elections, was marred by a surge in racist, xenophobic, and discriminatory rhetoric. Hundreds of thousands of people protested against far-right intolerance, and a majority of voters ultimately rejected the National Rally at the polls.

Five rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, filed a complaint with the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination arguing that discriminatory police identity checks targeting people who are Black or Arab, or perceived as such, constitute systemic racism, and calling for specific government actions to end ethnic profiling.
The CNCDH 2024 annual report revealed a significant increase in hate crimes in 2023 based on data from the Interior Ministry. Antisemitic acts surged by a staggering 284 percent, peaking after the October 2023 attacks in Israel and Gaza. Anti-Muslim acts also rose by 29 percent and other racist and xenophobic acts increased by 21 percent. The CNCDH condemned the role of political leaders and media in normalizing hate speech through discriminatory rhetoric.

SOS Homophobie's 2024 report revealed a worsening environment for LGBT people and a marked rise in anti-LGBT speech online. An EU FRA survey of LGBT people confirmed high

discrimination rates, particularly for transgender people, with only 15 percent of victims reporting incidents. Seventy-one percent of respondents perceived an increase in violence against LGBT people and 61 percent said they avoid public displays of affection.

## Asylum Seekers and Migrants

A migration law considered the "most regressive" in decades was enacted in January. Implementing decrees published in July include reduced appeal times for asylum seekers, expanded detention, and a requirement that foreigners sign contracts pledging adherence to French values, sparking criticism by nongovernmental groups. Following his September appointment, the interior minister made statements threatening the rights of migrants and asylum seekers, raising civil society concerns.

Migrants and asylum seekers faced inhumane living conditions, detention, and police abuse.

People continued to undertake the dangerous Channel crossing, given the lack of safe migration and asylum routes to the UK and decisions by France and UK prioritizing a focus on deterrence rather than saving lives and the push factors driving people to move. International Organization for Migration data show that in the first 11 months of 2024 at least 75 people went missing or died during the crossings, a record high.

In April, the Defender of Rights denounced illegal pushbacks at the French-Italian border.

In late 2023 and early 2024, France deported Sudanese nationals to Sudan despite the devastating ongoing armed conflict there.

## Children's Rights

In Marseille and elsewhere, unaccompanied migrant children faced arbitrary age assessments, depriving them of access to fundamental rights such as housing, health, and education. In May, 27 nongovernmental organizations petitioned the Conseil d'État to compel authorities to align the French system for assessing and sheltering unaccompanied children with relevant provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

An August report by UNICEF and the Federation of Solidarity Actors denounced the ever-increasing number of children without housing, forced to sleep on the streets.

French authorities failed to return 120 French children and their mothers who remained arbitrarily detained in degrading conditions in camps and prisons in northeastern Syria.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

In March, France enshrined the freedom to have an abortion in its constitution, a global first and a victory for reproductive rights.

The High Council for Equality's 2024 annual report indicated that women continue to experience violence, discrimination, and harassment at alarming rates, with recorded sexual violence incidents doubling between 2017 and 2022.

Despite ratifying the International Labour Organization Convention on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work (C190) in 2023, the French government at time of writing had yet to enact reforms to implement the convention's provisions and its accompanying recommendation.

In April, the Institute for Public Policy Studies revealed that between 2012 and 2021, 94 percent of rape complaints and 86 percent of sexual violence complaints were dismissed by the French justice system.

The September opening of the unprecedented Mazan rape trial spurred widespread mobilization among feminist organizations, renewing calls for French law to include the notion of consent in its definition of rape.

In July, the European Court of Human Rights rejected a case brought by 261 sex workers against France's 2016 law criminalizing payment for sexual services. Several UN agencies and several nongovernmental organizations criticized the law.

## International Justice

In May, French judges convicted three high-ranking Syrian officials for their role in the 2013 imprisonment, enforced disappearance, and torture of two dual French-Syrian nationals.

In June, the Paris Court of Appeal affirmed a French arrest warrant against President Bashar al-Assad for using chemical weapons in Syria in 2013; a subsequent challenge to the warrant by the prosecutor general was pending at time of writing.

## Olympic Games

France hosted the Olympic and Paralympic Games, the first since the International Olympic Committee adopted a strategic framework on human rights. Independent institutions and nongovernmental organizations, including Human Rights Watch, expressed concerns about human rights abuses connected to the Games.

Before the Games, this included the intensification of eviction operations described as "social cleansing" of people living on the streets or in precarious housing, particularly migrants.

During the Olympics, authorities used controversial algorithmic video surveillance technology authorized by an emergency temporary law heavily criticized for infringing on rights to privacy and non-discrimination. In June, the CNCDH warned of the law's risks to rights, including potential unwarranted police interventions and discrimination against racialized communities.

French authorities and several sports associations imposed bans on French athletes wearing the hijab, preventing Muslim women and girls from competing, a discriminatory measure denounced by the United Nations, many athletes, and nongovernmental groups.

The online harassment of women boxing competitors Lin Yu-ting from Taiwan and Imane Khelif from Algeria during the Olympics, which prompted an investigation by French authorities, underscored the harms of "sex testing" policies for women athletes.

# Georgia

Georgia took significant steps backward on human rights in 2024, with several new repressive laws undermining freedom of expression and of association. In November, the ruling party suspended efforts to open EU accession negotiations until late 2028, prompting mass, countrywide protests.

In June, Georgia's parliament adopted a law obliging certain nongovernmental groups and media outlets to register as "organizations serving the interests of a foreign power." The ruling party claimed the law aims to promote transparency but other official rhetoric, the timing of its introduction, and its substantive provisions suggest it aims to discredit and marginalize independent groups and media. In September, under the guise of "protecting family values and children," the authorities adopted a discriminatory anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) law imposing restrictions on rights to education, health, freedom of expression, and peaceful assembly.

In October, the ruling party claimed decisive victory in a highly disputed parliamentary election, which opposition parties, President Salome Zurabishvili, and independent observer groups claimed was marred by intimidation, vote-buying, and fraud.

Police repeatedly used excessive force against largely peaceful demonstrators protesting the government's decision to abort the EU accession negotiations. They groundlessly fired tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets at protesters. Police beat, chased down, and detained largely peaceful protesters. Violent mobs, presumably associated with authorities, participated in beatings. Several hundred protesters were arrested on misdemeanor and criminal charges. Many reported beatings and ill-treatment in detention; dozens required hospitalization.

## Parliamentary Election

The Georgian Dream party retained power with nearly 54 percent of the vote, while the united opposition garnered 38 percent. President Zurabishvli and opposition parties rejected the results amid widespread reports of ballot stuffing, vote buying, and intimidation. International observers found that the polls offered a "wide choice" of

candidates, but flagged concerns about the impact of recently adopted laws "on fundamental freedoms and civil society," widespread reports of pressure on public sector employees and other voters, and compromised vote secrecy in 24 percent of polling stations they visited. Georgian groups alleged that the ruling party resorted to a complex rigging scheme.

For the first time, parliament was fully elected through proportional party votes, rather than a mix of individual and party-based mandates, with voters using electronically scanned paper ballots in most precincts. Georgian Young Lawyers Association, a local watchdog group, filed complaints to annul the results in all precincts that used scanned ballots, claiming breach of vote secrecy because the selections were visible on ballot papers as voters fed them into scanners. Higher courts rejected all election-related complaints.

Georgia's international partners called for impartial investigations into alleged violations.

## Freedom of Expression and Assembly

In June, parliament adopted a law "On Transparency of Foreign Influence" put forward by the Georgia Dream party. A type of "foreign agent" law, it requires nongovernmental groups and media receiving 20 percent or more of their funding from abroad to register as "organizations serving the interests of a foreign power." It imposes onerous, intrusive, and duplicative reporting requirements, and allows the authorities to demand sensitive personal data from organizations and individuals. Non-compliance is punishable by maximum fines of 25,000 GEL (US$9,300).

In May, the Venice Commission, the Council of Europe's advisory body on constitutional matters, concluded that the rights restrictions that the law imposes fail to meet the "requirements of legality, legitimacy, and necessity in a democratic society" and violate the principles of proportionality and nondiscrimination.

Experts with the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) urged the authorities to scrap the law, as did Georgia's bilateral and multilateral partners.

Many NGOs and media refused to voluntarily register. Together with Georgia's president and opposition MPs, they challenged the law in the Constitutional Court, requesting its suspension pending the court's final decision. The court accepted the complaint on the merits.

In June, the United States imposed visa restrictions on dozens of Georgian nationals for their role in "undermining democracy in Georgia." The 27 EU heads of state and government stated that the law's adoption in effect halted Georgia's EU accession process.

## Violence against Activists

In the weeks before the "foreign agent" law's final adoption, civic and political activists became targets of an apparently coordinated campaign of harassment and intimidation. Hundreds of activists and their family members, including children, received repeated, anonymous threatening phone calls. Smear campaigns of posters in several cities featured the images of nongovernmental group leaders and critical journalists, calling them traitors and enemies.

From late April through June, unidentified assailants violently attacked over a dozen activists, leading, in many cases, to head and other injuries requiring hospitalization. Most attacks were committed by small groups of assailants in public places with witnesses and CCTV cameras nearby. While the police opened investigations, they have not identified or arrested any suspects at time of writing, raising concerns about the investigations.

In her September statement, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders observed that some attacks might have been incited by senior government officials' statements. The EU called on "Georgian political actors to refrain from using language [that] could further fuel … extreme polarization."

## Law Enforcement Abuses and Impunity

Tens of thousands of people protested the "foreign agents" bill continuously following its introduction in April. On multiple occasions, during especially large demonstrations in front of the parliament building, police used tear gas, water cannons, and pepper spray to disperse mainly nonviolent protesters. There were credible reports of police using rubber bullets at least once on May 1. Police arrested hundreds on misdemeanor charges, and

courts imposed fines on many after perfunctory trials. Over a dozen journalists and media representatives sustained injuries because of police use of force during the protests.

The Public Defender's Office (PDO) visited 182 detainees following the protests, 93 of whom reported police misconduct. The PDO referred 73 of these cases to the Special Investigation Service (SIS), a body responsible for investigating law enforcement abuses.

From January to September 2024, the SIS opened investigations into 147 cases of alleged ill-treatment by law enforcement, and 11 investigations into alleged interference with journalistic work. The prosecutor's office initiated three criminal investigations against law enforcement officers for alleged ill-treatment.

In September, the US imposed sanctions on two Interior Ministry officials for their involvement in "the violent response to peaceful protests," and imposed visa restrictions on dozens of other individuals playing a "critical role in advancing undemocratic legislation and restricting civil society."

Also in September, the European Court of Human Rights found that Georgian authorities violated the prohibition on torture and the right to liberty by failing to effectively investigate Azerbaijani journalist Afgan Mukhtarli's alleged abduction, mistreatment, and illegal transfer to Azerbaijan in 2017.

## Gender and Sexuality

In September, parliament adopted anti-LGBT amendments imposing discriminatory restrictions on rights to education, health, freedom of expression, and peaceful assembly. The amendments ban gender-affirming medical care for trans people, same-sex marriage, and adoption by same-sex couples. They also prohibit positive references to LGBT people in literature, film, and media, as well as in schools and at public gatherings.

In June, the Venice Commission urged the authorities not to adopt the amendments, warning that their mere introduction could deepen the already hostile and stigmatizing atmosphere against LGBT individuals in Georgia.

In 2024, the organizers of Tbilisi Pride refrained from holding in-person events during Pride Month, citing concerns over potential violence and hate rhetoric, compounded by introduction of the anti-LGBT legislation.

In April, the parliament abolished mandatory parliamentary and municipal council quotas for women. The quotas required that at least one in every four individuals on a political party list be of a different gender than the majority. The Venice Commission and OSCE criticized the move, calling on the authorities to increase women's political representation.

Women's political representation in Georgia remains well under the recommended European standard of 40 percent. Only 3 of Georgia's 64 municipalities have female mayors, and women comprised less than 19 percent of MPs elected in 2020.

## Children's Rights

In its concluding observations on Georgia, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child highlighted the need for urgent measures in several key areas, including abuse, neglect, sexual violence, and exploitation of children. The committee expressed concern over insufficient measures to address violence in families, residential care, foster care, and educational institutions.

In June, the committee issued a decision on a complaint filed on behalf of 57 children residing in an orphanage run by the Georgian Orthodox Church. It found that the government failed to take necessary action to investigate and address the frequent physical and psychological abuse of children living there.

## Labor rights

Labor rights continue to be a serious concern in Georgia. Overtime regulations are weak, wage theft is widespread, social protections are minimal, and wages are effectively unregulated. The national minimum wage of 20 GEL per month (US$7) has not been updated since 1999 and is almost 93 times lower than the estimated living wage of 1,858 GEL.

According to the Labor Inspectorate, 34 workers died and 347 were injured in work-related accidents during 2023. The rate of workplace injuries per 100,000 workers increased every year since 2020, though workplace deaths have declined over the same period.

# Germany

At the end of 2024, the German coalition government collapsed following clashes over the national budget, which saw the finance minister sacked.

During 2024, German democratic political parties failed to counter mainstream far-right, racist, and anti-migrant narratives. Meanwhile, Germany's far-right political party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), gained significant political power in two Eastern German state elections. Attacks against marginalized groups, such as LGBT people, and racist, right-wing, and antisemitic violence appeared to be on the rise.

Following the escalation of the hostilities between Israel and Palestinian armed groups after October 2023, there was a sharp uptick in antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate violence and speech in Germany. The authorities also continued to crack down on protests, with incidents of reported police violence. A Bundestag resolution on antisemitism adopted in November raised concerns about stigmatization of Muslims and immigrant communities and interference with speech and protest rights while downplaying homegrown antisemitism.

In a positive development, the government adopted a long-awaited law that created a rights-respecting legal gender recognition procedure for transgender people.

## Rule of Law

German authorities stifled civic space in 2024 by restricting individuals' freedom of expression, assembly, and association. The police, among others, frequently resorted to violence at climate and pro-Palestine protests. This was also reflected in the 2024 edition of the European Commission's annual Rule of Law report.

Germany continued to criminalize climate protests. In May, the authorities indicted the climate activist group Last Generation on charges typically reserved for serious organized crime in response to the group's disruptive protests. Armed police had previously raided members' apartments and surveilled their communications.

Police frequently used excessive force against pro-Palestine protesters. The authorities also denied specific persons entry into Germany to speak at pro-Palestine events.

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) as well as the newly formed political party, Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), regularly excluded journalists from their events, which the German Journalist Association described as a restriction to press freedom. According to Reporters Without Borders, however, Germany experienced a decline in attacks on journalists by far-right groups.

## Discrimination and Intolerance

Mainstream political parties failed to forcefully counter, and even indulged, far-right, racist, anti-migrant narratives. Meanwhile, racialized communities felt unsafe with the far-right gaining more political power.

In January, the investigative journalist group Correctiv revealed that members of the AfD had met with far-right extremists in Berlin-neighboring Potsdam in November 2023 to discuss plans to "remigrate," i.e. deport, immigrants and "non-assimilated citizens." In reaction, for weeks, hundreds of thousands of people across the country took to the streets in anti-AfD protests. The party nonetheless made important electoral gains later in the year.

Official statistics published in May showed a new record high of registered politically motivated crimes, including a significant increase in attacks targeting housing for migrants and asylum seekers. Among the total of 60,028 crimes, right-wing motivated crimes rose by 23 percent in 2023 compared to 2022 (from 23,493 to 28,945).

Since October 7, 2023, civil society groups warned that anti-Muslim hate violence and racism were on the rise, documenting a total of 1,926 cases for 2023—a 114 percent increase compared to 2022. These numbers were mirrored in official statistics of "anti-Islamic" crimes, which showed a 140 percent increase in 2023 compared to 2022, with a total of 1,464 registered cases.

At the same time, antisemitic attacks drastically rose after October 7. The government registered a total of 5,164 antisemitic crimes in 2023—a 96 percent increase over 2022 (2,641).

In July, an independent study by the German Center for Integration and Migration Research examined how racism has been treated in mainstream media in the past 30 years, finding that, while there has been increased sensitization around racism, coverage focused on individual cases of racism rather than systemic racism in Germany.

## Migrants and Asylum Seekers

In 2024, political debates around asylum and deportation regulations in Germany resulted in controversial decisions.

In June, the government decided to tighten its deportation laws, whereby foreigners who make a single comment glorifying or approving of a terrorist crime on social media can be deported.

In August, for the first time since the Taliban took power in 2021, the government deported 28 individuals to Afghanistan, claiming they were all "convicted offenders who had no right to stay in Germany." This decision came on the heels of a deadly knife attack in Solingen where the suspect was a rejected Syrian asylum seeker. Meanwhile, the implementation of the government's special program to bring at-risk Afghans to Germany continued to face problems—with only 540 Afghans having arrived in Germany between October 2022 and July 2024.

Germany continued backsliding on the EU-Schengen principle of free internal movement when Interior Minister Nancy Faeser announced in September that temporary controls would be reintroduced at all land borders to "reduce irregular migration." It had already instituted controls at borders to Switzerland, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Austria in October 2023.

In June, a new citizenship law took effect, which requires people applying for naturalization in Germany to affirm Israel's right to exist. The government claimed that this

was a reaction to rising antisemitism in Germany and Germany's position that Israel's security is a matter of Germany's national interest.

Between January and August, 174,369 people applied for asylum in Germany, a decrease of 21.7 percent compared to the same period in 2023. Most applicants came from Syria, Afghanistan, and Turkey.

In February, the government reiterated its commitment to protect Ukrainians in Germany. However, a study showed that integration was still slow compared to other EU countries, with only 27 percent of Ukrainians able to find work. In August, the central registry of foreigners included 1,157,220 Ukrainian nationals—many of whom had been granted temporary protection.

## Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

In April, the government passed a much-awaited Self-Determination Law ("*Selbstbestimmungsgesetz*") which allows transgender, intersex, and non-binary people to change their name and gender marker on official documents to reflect their gender identity via a simple administrative procedure and without need for "expert reports." The law took effect in August and people began receiving their modified documents in November.

## Domestic Violence

Official statistics showed police registered 256,276 persons affected by domestic violence in 2023, an increase of 6.5 percent over 2022, and women comprised over 70 percent of victims. Almost 80 percent of the 167,865 victims who reported violence by an intimate partner were women. Intra-family domestic violence killed 92 women.

## Poverty

Official statistics showed that, in 2023, 17.7 million people, 21.2 percent of the population, were at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Following a visit in late 2023, the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights said Germany's inadequate action to combat poverty and houselessness was resulting in

growing social and economic inequality. The commissioner noted that poverty particularly affected children, older persons, and persons with disabilities.

In April, the government adopted its first Action Plan Against Homelessness, with the aim of ending homelessness by 2030.

Disagreements among governing coalition parties led to inaction, negatively affecting the right to social security. The government did not increase the amount of basic social security support under the "Citizen Income" despite widespread criticism of its inadequacy. At this writing, plans to legislate for a new universal child basic income by 2025 had stalled almost completely.

## Business and Human Rights

Following the adoption of the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive in June 2024, the German government announced that in 2025 it would reduce by two thirds the number of companies subject to human rights due diligence obligations in existing national law, the German Supply Chain Act, until full phase-in of the legislation required by the EU directive in 2029. German civil society groups criticized the move. The German and EU law both require companies to conduct human rights due diligence, but EU law is stronger on environmental protection and civil liability.

# Greece

Greece faces persistent rule of law challenges stemming from state actions that undermine democratic institutions and harm human rights, including interference with media freedom, state-ordered surveillance of journalists, and a hostile environment for human rights defenders. Violations of asylum seekers and migrants' rights persisted in 2024, with reports of pushbacks, poor detention conditions for migrants, and inadequate reception facilities for asylum seekers.

## Freedom of Media

In February, the European Parliament adopted a landmark resolution expressing "grave concerns" about "very serious threats" to democracy, fundamental rights, and media freedom in Greece.

Greece continues to rank last in the EU for press freedom, according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), reflecting a hostile environment for journalists who face state surveillance, abusive lawsuits, government interference, and smear campaigns.

In October, a Greek court dismissed on substantive grounds a defamation lawsuit filed by Grigoris Dimitriadis, former general secretary in the prime minister's office, against journalists who exposed his alleged role in the Predator spyware scandal, a positive step for press freedom.

In July, two suspects in the 2021 murder of journalist Giorgos Karaivaz were acquitted, sparking criticism from press freedom organizations at ongoing impunity for the killing.

## Surveillance

The "Predatorgate" spyware scandal, involving government-ordered surveillance of journalists and politicians—which was the subject of a European Parliament special investigation—continued to raise rule of law concerns.

In July, a Supreme Court prosecutor cleared state agencies and officials of responsibility for the use of Predator spyware, despite evidence of state involvement from independent investigations.

More positively, in April, Greece's highest court ruled unconstitutional a 2021 amendment blocking individuals from knowing they were being subject to state surveillance.

The Hellenic Data Protection Authority fined the Ministry of Migration 175,000 Euros for running biometric and artificial intelligence-based surveillance systems in camps housing migrants without proper privacy and data protection safeguards.

## Attacks on Civil Society

In April, the Greek National Commission for Human Rights warned of a pervasive climate of fear for migrant rights defenders, driven by smear campaigns, harassment, and threats of prosecution for providing humanitarian aid.

The criminal case against human rights defenders Panayote Dimitras and Tommy Olsen for exposing violations at Greece's borders remained pending at time of writing, with Dimitras still under a travel ban. In May, Dimitras and his wife were questioned in a separate investigation into alleged financial misconduct following a 2023 asset freeze.

In January, 16 members of the nongovernmental group Emergency Response Centre International were acquitted of espionage and assisting a criminal organization, following years of legal proceedings related to their 2018 efforts to rescue migrants in the Aegean Sea.

Unfounded criminal charges were dismissed in April against 35 activists accused of facilitating irregular migration for assisting people on the move.

## Poverty and Inequality

Greece had one of the highest risks of poverty and social exclusion in the EU, at 26 percent. The Institute of Labor's annual report emphasized high unemployment rates, particularly among young people and women, along with poor working conditions and declining real wages.

The Greek Network for Combating Poverty (GNCP) documented the burden of indirect taxes on low-income households and rising living costs. GNCP's research highlighted the disproportionate impact on children, unemployed people, and renters, underscoring the urgent need for a more progressive tax system and a stronger social security system.

## Migrants and Asylum Seekers

By the end of November, 57,309 asylum seekers and migrants had arrived in Greece by sea or across the land border with Türkiye, up from 43,166 in the same period in 2023.

A Greek court acquitted for lack of jurisdiction nine individuals accused of smuggling and causing the Pylos shipwreck, a 2023 deadly incident where a vessel carrying around 750 migrants capsized off the coast of Greece, resulting in hundreds of deaths.

A criminal complaint filed by survivors in September 2023, alleging inadequate rescue measures by Greek authorities and implicating the Hellenic Coast Guard in the vessel's capsizing, remained pending at time of writing. Rights groups have criticized the slow pace of the investigation.

Reports from Frontex's Fundamental Rights Office in December 2023 and the European Ombudsman in March raised serious concerns about Greece's handling of the shipwreck. The reports noted insufficient rescue efforts and a lack of cooperation from Greek authorities during the rescue with Frontex and in subsequent investigations.

In June, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) held a public hearing on two cases alleging pushbacks of migrants and asylum seekers by Greek authorities, including of unaccompanied children. The cases highlight Greece's systematic and ongoing practice of pushbacks.

A July report from Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) documented poor conditions in immigration detention, including overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, inadequate healthcare, and allegations of ill-treatment, including in EU-funded centers.

Reception conditions for asylum seekers also remained inadequate. A landmark ECtHR ruling in October found conditions in the Samos hotspot in 2020 breached the prohibition of ill-treatment under the European Convention on Human Rights. A Greek Ombudsman report in April criticized overcrowding, remote camp locations, and lack of basic services, with many residents in camps facing delays in cash assistance and food. Women and girls faced particular difficulties related to security, privacy, and accessing health care.

In October, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) ruled on Greece's designation of Türkiye as a "safe third country" for certain nationalities under the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. It held that EU countries cannot reject asylum applications as inadmissible based on the "safe third country" concept if the asylum seeker will be denied entry to that designated safe country. The ruling directly impacts the Greek authorities' systematic rejection of asylum seekers based on the "safe third country" concept, a practice that leaves them in legal limbo.

The September death of Pakistani migrant Muhammad Kamran Ashiq in an Athens police station under suspicious circumstances fueled further concerns about police brutality and ill-treatment of migrants in Greece.

## Migrant Children

The number of refugee and migrant children arriving in Greece quadrupled in the first half of 2024 compared to the first half of 2023, with over 1,500 arriving unaccompanied. A landmark court ruling by the First Instance Administrative Court of Athens affirmed in May that individuals with disputed age must be treated as children until a final age assessment.

## Racism and Intolerance

The Racist Violence Recording Network (RVRN) reported in April a sharp rise in racist violence in 2023, documenting 158 incidents, primarily targeting migrants and LGBT individuals.

In July, three men who acted as vigilantes and illegally detained 13 migrants during the 2023 Evros wildfires received lenient sentences, with the court dismissing racism as a motivation. A supreme court prosecutor subsequently ordered a review of the conviction.

In July, a Mytilene court convicted 17 individuals for a 2018 racist attack against asylum seekers and migrants, with racist motives recognized in sentencing for six.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Greece legalized same-sex marriage in February.

However, discrimination against LGBT individuals persists, as highlighted in a survey by the European Union's Agency for Fundamental Rights in May, and other reports of violence.

In July, the Mixed Jury Court of Appeal of Athens unanimously convicted two men over the killing of 33-year-old queer activist and human rights defender Zak Kostopoulos in 2018, sentencing one defendant to six years in prison and the other to five years' house arrest, taking into account his older age. The men had initially been sentenced to 10-year prison terms.

## Women's Rights

The April killing of Kyriaki Griva outside an Athens police station, where she had sought protection from her abusive ex-boyfriend but was turned away, sparked protests and demands for legal reforms to address femicide and improved police response to domestic violence.

The ECtHR ruled in January that Greece violated the privacy of HIV-positive women by publicizing their identities, photos, and HIV status after forcibly testing them in 2012. The regulation that had allowed HIV testing without informed consent was repealed in 2015.

In February, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and, in June, Greece's National Commission for Human Rights, expressed concern about the high prevalence of gender-based violence in Greece. CEDAW urged Greece to criminalize femicide, strengthen support services, and improve investigations and prosecutions.

# Guatemala

In January, President Bernardo Arévalo took office, overcoming numerous attempts led by Attorney General Consuelo Porras to unlawfully overturn the election.

The Attorney General's Office continued a campaign of politically motivated prosecutions against independent journalists, prosecutors and judges as well as Arévalo administration officials.

## Judicial Independence and Corruption

The lack of judicial independence remains a critical issue in Guatemala, undermining the rule of law and threatening human rights protections. It stems from systemic problems in the judicial selection process, including non-transparent nomination procedures, political meddling, and undue influence from corrupt actors. The judiciary often fails to hold powerful interests accountable, instead serving to protect them.

In September, two "nomination committees," formed by law school deans, judges, and bar association representatives, submitted to Congress a list of candidates for all 13 Supreme Court and 156 Court of Appeals positions for the 2024-2029 term—a critical opportunity to bolster judicial independence in the country. In October, Congress appointed new judges to the Supreme Court and Courts of Appeals. Many had been under criminal investigation for alleged influence peddling in previous judicial selection processes.

In March, President Arévalo asked the Organization of American States (OAS) to send an observation mission to monitor the justices' selection process. In September, the OAS mission published a preliminary report noting conflicts of interest, the nomination of candidates reported to be involved in corruption or human rights abuses, and inadequate vetting procedures.

## Arbitrary Criminal Prosecutions

Under Porras, the Attorney General's Office has for years orchestrated spurious criminal prosecutions against justice officials, human rights defenders, anti-corruption activists, and

officials of the Arévalo administration. In 2023, Porras's office conducted bogus criminal investigations aimed at preventing President Arévalo from taking office.

Prosecutors have also asked the Supreme Court to lift President Arévalo's immunity from criminal prosecution and have sought to proscribe the ruling party, Movimiento Semilla.

In July, Virginia Laparra, a former anti-corruption prosecutor, fled Guatemala after nearly two years imprisoned on spurious charges. Laparra had been under house arrest since January. Her prosecution was widely seen as retaliation for her work on high-profile corruption cases against public officials and organized crime.

Former anti-corruption prosecutor Stuardo Campo remained in prison at time of writing, on charges of "abuse of authority" and "breach of duties," among others. The hearings in his case have been postponed multiple times, undermining his right to due process.

According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala (UDEFEGUA), at least 91 people fled into exile due to criminal prosecution, threats, or harassment since 2022. These included 44 legal professionals and 26 human rights defenders.

## Civic Space

UDEFEGUA documented over 9,000 instances of aggression—including criminalization, harassment, defamation, stigmatization, threats, intimidation, and violence—against human rights defenders, journalists, organizations, and communities working to defend human rights, the highest recorded number to date.

The Attorney General's Office and a section of the judiciary have created a hostile environment for the exercise of freedom of expression and the press. Journalists face arbitrary detention, restrictions on news coverage, and online harassment. According to the NGO Journalists' Observatory, at least 25 journalists fled the country in the last few years.

In late December, journalist César Leiva was shot to death in the department of Jutiapa and journalist Gleymer Villeda was killed in Izabal department. Three other journalists were murdered in 2023. Impunity for crimes against the press, particularly targeting those

investigating public interest issues like corruption and human rights violations, remains the norm.

UDEFEGUA reported that, between March 2023 and August 2024, at least 18 human rights defenders were murdered in Guatemala. In June, José Domingo, a lawyer and human rights defender, was murdered. Domingo worked closely with the United Farmworkers Committee (CUC), one of the country's most prominent peasant organizations. He was known for his advocacy on behalf of farmworkers and Indigenous groups, providing legal support to these communities in their struggles for land rights and better working conditions. Another CUC leader, Gustavo Yaxón, was injured in the same attack and died from the injuries a few days later.

In November, a Guatemalan appeals court ordered journalist José Rubén Zamora back to prison, overturning an October court decision that had granted him house arrest after determining his two-year pre-trial detention was excessive. Zamora, 68, founder of *El Periódico* was initially arrested in July 2022 on money laundering charges and sentenced to six years in prison. In October 2023, an appeals court overturned the verdict, ordering a retrial. Prior to his transfer to house arrest, several UN experts had raised concerns about his detention conditions. At time of writing, his retrial was pending.

In March, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention said Zamora's detention was arbitrary, and called for his immediate release.

## Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

High levels of poverty and inequality, structural discrimination, and corruption limit access to fundamental rights, especially for groups that have historically faced exclusion, including Indigenous peoples as well as Afro-descendant and rural communities. According to the official figures, 56 percent of the population was living in poverty in 2023, including 16 percent in extreme poverty, as defined by the national poverty line.

Acute and chronic malnutrition affect children at alarming rates. As of October, over 25,000 cases of acute malnutrition in children were reported by the government. By October, reported cases were significantly higher than what was typically seen at this time of year in 2021-2023 (18,500 cases on average). According to government figures, chronic malnutrition

affects 46.5 percent of children under five years old nationwide and according to the World Bank, Guatemala has one of the highest such rates globally.

Between January and October, 278 children under five died in cases associated with malnutrition. The Arévalo administration launched the "Mano a Mano" Intersectoral Initiative, aiming to reduce chronic malnutrition by ten percentage points during its four-year term.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported an increase in forced evictions and land conflicts in 2023, primarily affecting Indigenous communities. In July, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) expressed concern about the lack of mechanisms for recognizing and titling ancestral lands, allowing for the advancement of hydroelectric, mining and oil company, and monoculture projects without free, prior and informed consultation. Indigenous leaders defending their land and environment face criminalization, harassment, and threats. According to media reports, the evictions that have been carried out have often involved abuses by police and private security agents, resulting in the destruction of homes and property, forced displacement, and other ESCR violations for the affected communities.

In December, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled that Guatemala violated multiple rights of the Indigenous Maya Q'eqchi' people in the El Estor municipality, Izabal state, including by failing to properly title their lands and conduct adequate prior consultation regarding mining activities affecting their territory.

## Migrants and Asylum Seekers

Guatemala serves as a country of origin, destination, transit, and return for migrants and asylum seekers. In 2023, Guatemala experienced a high influx of migrants, with over one million people entering the country. The majority of these people were from Venezuela and Honduras.

In June 2023, Guatemala and the United States launched "safe mobility offices" to facilitate legal pathways for Guatemalans to enter the US, including family reunification and temporary work visas. In May, the program was expanded to include Hondurans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans present in Guatemala.

In September, Guatemala welcomed 135 Nicaraguan political prisoners, whom the Nicaraguan government released and expelled as part of an agreement with the US and Guatemala. The prisoners will stay in Guatemala temporarily, where they will be able to apply for resettlement in the US or elsewhere.

## Public Safety

Guatemala grapples with organized crime, drug trafficking, and institutional weaknesses in the justice system.

The homicide rate, which peaked in 2009 at 46 per 100,000 people, has since declined steadily, reaching 16.1 per 100,000 in 2023. During the first half of 2024, there was a seven percent decrease in the homicide rate in the country compared to the same period the previous year, according to government data. There are also other significant challenges, including high levels of human trafficking, extortion, and violence against women.

The 2023 National Survey of Household Quality and Well-being (ENCABIH) revealed that 48 percent of women have suffered some type of gender-based violence at least once in their lifetime. In the first half of 2024, civil society groups reported 206 violent deaths of women, with 44 percent classified as femicides. Impunity in cases of violence against women remains the norm.

## Sexual Violence Against Girls

Pregnancy during adolescence and early parenthood affects thousands of girls in Guatemala. The Observatory for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (OSAR) reported 37,190 pregnancies among adolescents and girls ages 10 to 19 between January and August 2024, including 1,298 among girls ages 10 to 14. Under Guatemalan criminal law, all pregnancies among girls under age 14 are considered the result of sexual violence.

Access to maternal health care for pregnant girls is hindered by both inadequate healthcare goods and services and physical, economic, and discriminatory barriers. In rural areas, some health centers lack the necessary supplies, including prenatal vitamins, to properly care for pregnant girls. Girls and their families travel long distances, sometimes for hours or even

days, to reach healthcare facilities where they can receive necessary medical treatment, further depleting many households' already-limited financial resources.

Girls who experience pregnancies as a result of sexual violence often encounter discriminatory treatment from healthcare professionals. In some cases, during and after pregnancy and childbirth, girls do not receive specialized care commensurate with their age.

Pregnancies under the age of 14 carry significant risks to girls' physical and mental health and put girls' lives at risk. In Guatemala, abortion is criminalized, except when the life of the pregnant woman, girl, or person is in danger, and penalties vary from one to twelve years in prison. Most medical professionals interpret this exception to include only cases where death would be immediate or imminent. Safe and legal abortion for girls under 14, whose pregnancies are a result of sexual violence—and inherently put their lives at risk because of age—remains unavailable.

## Gender and Sexuality

Guatemala does not allow same-sex marriage or legal gender recognition for transgender people, and lacks comprehensive anti-LGBT discrimination legislation.

In June, Guatemala's Constitutional Court called on authorities to uphold "spiritual and moral values" and for participants to observe "good morals" during the annual Pride Parade.

## Sanctions

In January, the European Union established a dedicated individual sanctions regime and sanctioned five individuals for undermining democracy and the rule of law before and following the 2023 presidential election.

Also in January, the US State Department imposed visa restrictions on former President Alejandro Giammattei and three of his children, citing his involvement in "significant corruption." The State Department has imposed visa restrictions on Attorney General Porras, former President Giammattei, and their families, citing corruption and rule of law concerns. In December 2023, it also restricted visas for nearly three hundred Guatemalans, including over one hundred congressmembers, for undermining democracy during the presidential transition.

# Guinea

In 2024, military authorities in Guinea continued to crackdown on media, opposition, and dissent.

In December 2022, the military junta committed to holding presidential and legislative elections by December 2024 as part of a transition roadmap agreed with the regional bloc, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). However, on September 19, Foreign Affairs Minister Morissanda Kouyaté said that elections will take place in 2025.

On February 19, Colonel Mamady Doumbouya dissolved the government without providing any reason. On February 28, Mamadou Oury Bah was appointed as the new prime minister.

In July, the junta released a draft of the new constitution expected to be voted in a referendum before December 2024. The draft provides for a five-year presidential term, renewable once.

Also in July, a Guinean court convicted Guinea's former self-declared president Moussa Dadis Camara, and seven others, in a landmark trial for rapes and killings of protesters in 2009.

Guinea's penal code punishes undefined "indecent acts" or "acts against nature" with six months to three years in prison.

## Excessive Use of Force

The junta banned protests in May 2022. Security forces have used excessive force, including tear gas and live ammunition, to disperse those who defied the ban, leading to the death of at least 59 protesters and other citizens since 2022, including at least 20 in 2024, according to the National Front for the Defense of the Constitution (Front national pour la défense de la Constitution, FNDC), a coalition of Guinean civil society groups and opposition parties. Human Rights Watch documented the killing by security forces of at least eight people, including three children, during protests in Conakry since January, with protesters assaulting the police and gendarmes.

## Crackdown on Media, Opposition, and Dissent

On October 29, the Territorial Administration and Decentralization minister dissolved 107 political parties, and placed 67 more under observation, giving them three months to provide the ministry with required information. Among the parties under observation are three prominent opposition parties, including the Rally of the Guinean People (Rassemblement du peuple de Guinée, RPG) headed by former President Condé, the Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea (Union des Forces Démocratiques de Guinée, UFDG) headed by Cellou Dalein Diallo, and the Union of Republican Forces (Union des forces républicaines, UFR) headed by former Prime Minister Sidya Touré. The opposition contends that the decision aims at excluding key political figures from the elections.

On January 18, ahead of a press union-led protest against the jamming of radio stations in November 2023, security forces besieged the House of the Press, an independent media organization in Conakry, trapping at least 30 journalists inside for hours, and arrested nine other journalists. Taken to two gendarmerie posts for questioning, the nine were released in the evening without charges.

On the same day, security forces arbitrarily arrested Sékou Jamal Pendessa, secretary-general of the Union of Press Professionals of Guinea (Syndicat des professionnels de la presse de Guinée, SPPG). After three days of detention, Pendessa was charged with "unlawful participation in public demonstration," and convicted by a court in Conakry. He was released on February 28.

On May 21, Information and Communication Minister Fana Soumah signed a decree revoking the licenses of six media outlets, citing their lack of compliance with "the laws on press freedom, ... and the Code of Good Conduct for Journalists."

The junta used arbitrary arrests to silence dissent.

On July 9, security forces forcibly disappeared Oumar Sylla, Mamadou Billo Bah, and Mohamed Cissé, FNDC members. The FNDC said that they were tortured during extrajudicial interrogations. Mohamed Cissé was released the following day, while Oumar Sylla and Mamadou Billo Bah remain missing. Authorities have yet to acknowledge their

detention or disclose their whereabouts, despite inquiries by lawyers representing the men.

## Trial for 2009 Massacre

On July 31, a Guinean court convicted Guinea's former self-declared president Moussa Dadis Camara, and seven others, for rapes and killings of protesters in 2009, when security forces opened fire on a peaceful protest, killing over 150 people and raping dozens of women and girls.

The court decided to reclassify all the charges from ordinary crimes to crimes against humanity, based on a request by the prosecution. This was the first time crimes against humanity have been prosecuted in Guinea.

The judges found Moussa Dadis Camara, Aboubacar Diakité, also known as Toumba, and Moussa Tiégboro Camara guilty under the principle of command responsibility for the crimes against humanity of murder, kidnapping, sexual violence, and torture, among others. They sentenced both Dadis Camara and Tiégboro to 20 years in prison and Toumba to 10 years. The judges also found five others guilty of committing various crimes against humanity, ranging from murder to sexual violence and torture, among other crimes, and ordered sentences ranging from 10 years to life in prison. The judges acquitted four men.

The judges also ruled on reparations claims, awarding between 200 million to 1.5 billion Guinean francs (approximately US$23,000 to $172,500) to the different groups of victims, including those who suffered physical and psychological trauma.

The convicted men have the right to appeal.

On September 17, 2024, Claude Pivi, a former Guinean minister for Presidential Security, was arrested near the Liberian-Guinean border by the Liberian police. Pivi was convicted in absentia on charges of crimes against humanity in July. Pivi has been brought to detention facilities in Conakry to serve his sentence.

After the 2009 assault, security forces engaged in a cover-up, burying bodies in mass graves. The trial began on September 28, 2022, and lasted almost two years, during which

judges heard from more than 100 victims, 11 accused, and over a dozen witnesses, including high-level government officials.

On October 14, 2009, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced that the situation in Guinea was under preliminary examination, during which the court assesses whether it should open an investigation. The Guinean minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, Alexandre Cécé Loua, told the ICC that Guinea was "able and willing" to ensure justice for the September 2009 crimes through its national courts and that an ICC investigation was, thus, unnecessary.

The ICC has pursued a robust program of activity to help ensure justice for the September 2009 crimes and appears to have been a major factor in galvanizing progress over time. Guinean government officials, civil society activists, and international observers all pointed to the ICC as pivotal to domestic progress in this case.

The ICC prosecutor attended the start of the trial, after which the prosecutor's office closed its preliminary examination on September 29, 2022. At the same time, the prosecutor's office signed a memorandum of understanding with Guinea, saying that it would "work actively and collaboratively" with Guinean authorities to ensure accountability for the September 28 crimes.

## Natural Resources and Community Concerns

Guinea has the world's largest reserves of bauxite, the ore needed to produce aluminum, and is on track to become the world's largest producer in 2024. Bauxite mining, which has expanded rapidly over the past decade, has led to tens of thousands of farmers losing their land, often not adequately compensated, and has damaged communities' water sources in the Boké region.

Two multinational mining consortia continued construction on the railway, port, and mining infrastructure necessary to develop the massive Simandou iron ore deposit in southeastern Guinea. Guinean and international civil society groups have expressed concern that the Simandou project will severely harm the land and water access of nearby communities.

# Haiti

In 2024, Haiti's multidimensional crisis reached catastrophic levels. Criminal groups united under the "Viv Ansanm" coalition intensified large-scale and coordinated attacks that brought the country to a standstill from February to May, and from October to the present. These attacks severely impacted public services, including electricity, water supply, sanitation, health care, education, and transportation, significantly restricting access to essential goods. Half of Haiti's population struggled daily to afford food, giving the country one of the highest rates of acute food insecurity in the world.

Killings and kidnappings by criminal groups increased, with a weak state response and an ineffectual justice system. Sexual violence became widespread, with survivors having minimal access to health services and a near-absence of justice. Rising hunger and extreme poverty have forced children to join criminal groups, where they face abuse, including sexual exploitation.

A new transitional government, led by a prime minister and a Transitional Presidential Council, was established with the aim of strengthening security and organizing free and fair elections. However, political instability persisted, with several members of the transitional presidential council facing corruption allegations, and scant progress in establishing an electoral calendar.

The transitional prime minister was abruptly dismissed by the Transitional Presidential Council along with his government in early November and a new prime minister, Alix Didier Fils-Aimé was appointed.

As violence escalated, the United Nations-authorized Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission began deployment but was unable to effectively support the police in fighting criminal groups due to a lack of funding and personnel. The transitional government requested that the UN Security Council and the UN Secretary-General transform the mission into a UN peacekeeping operation.

## Violence by Criminal Groups

United Nations agencies reported that criminal groups control around 85 percent of Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital and its metropolitan area. These groups have rapidly expanded into previously secure areas of Port-au-Prince, as well as key regions such as the Ouest and Artibonite departments, Haiti's agricultural hub. Many of these groups have alleged ties to police officers and political and economic elites.

In June, the MSS mission, led by Kenya, began operations. Jamaica, Belize, and the Bahamas have contributed a small number of personnel, bringing its total personnel to only 416 officers, far below the expected 2,500, by early December. The mission has participated in some patrols and anti-crime operations with the Haitian police, and has developed important human rights safeguards and monitoring and accountability mechanisms, but the mission remains in the pre-deployment phase and continues to face significant financial and logistical challenges.

During the UN General Assembly session in late September, Haiti's transitional presidential council requested transforming the MSS mission into a UN peacekeeping operation to secure stable funding, expand capabilities, and strengthen UN Member States' commitments to security in Haiti. This call has been backed by the US, the lead funder of the MSS, as well as Kenya and the Organization of American States (OAS), among others. In November, the UN Security Council asked the UN Secretary-General to present recommendations for the role the UN could play in helping address the security, economic, and humanitarian crises in the country.

The UN, the European Union, Canada, and the US have taken measures against former Haitian officials and criminal groups, including an arms embargo and targeted sanctions. Two pieces of legislation have also been introduced in the US Congress aimed at addressing the illegal arms flows to Haiti. Yet international efforts, particularly financial support to the MSS, remain insufficient.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that, between January and early December, criminal groups killed nearly 5,000 people and kidnapped more than 1,000.

Sexual violence has escalated, becoming widespread. Survivors face severely limited or nonexistent access to protection and care services. Between January and October, the Gender-Based Violence (GBV) sub-cluster reported 5,400 cases of gender-based violence, with 72 percent involving sexual violence allegedly committed mostly by members of criminal groups.

Children are among the hardest hit by the violence. Rising hunger and severe poverty have forced hundreds, possibly thousands, of children to join criminal groups, where they are coerced into illegal activities and face abuse, including girls facing labor and sexual exploitation. According to the UN, approximately half a million children live under the control of these groups, with at least 30 percent of their members being children.

Despite the appointment of a new director general in the police and contributions from Haiti's partners, such as funding, equipment and arms, the police continue to face financial, logistical, and staffing shortcomings to protect people from criminal violence, exacerbated by the flow of weapons and ammunition to Haiti, largely from the US state of Florida.

As of September, the so-called "self-defense" groups have reportedly killed over 260 individuals suspected of links to criminal organizations, often in collusion with the police, and have also adopted its tactics, such as extortion, according to the UN.

## Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

The security crisis and political instability have compounded a dire humanitarian situation. According to the World Bank, over 64 percent of Haiti's population of 11.7 million lived on less than US$3.65 per day in 2024.

The World Food Program has identified Haiti as having one of the highest proportions of acutely food insecure people in any crisis worldwide, in a report covering August 2024 to February 2025. About 5.5 million people require humanitarian assistance and 5.4 million are facing acute food insecurity, including 2 million experiencing emergency levels, and 6,000 people in catastrophic levels of hunger and a collapse of their livelihoods.

Criminal violence and environmental hazards have severely disrupted economic activities, leading to significant losses in agricultural activities and other livelihoods. These challenges have further deepened poverty and increased unemployment across the country.

Only 40 percent of Haitians had access to electricity, but intermittently and at high prices. Forty-five percent of the population lacks access to clean drinking water, and 7 out of 10 people do not have access to an improved sanitation system, aggravating the spread of cholera. As of October, the Ministry of Public Health and Population reported 87,382 suspected cases of cholera and 1,306 deaths since the beginning of the ongoing outbreak in October 2022.

Haiti's health system is on the verge of collapse. About 20 percent of health facilities remain operational, with just 40 percent functioning nationwide. Over 40,000 health workers fled the country due to violence, according to the UN Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH). As the system crumbles under violence and instability, two out of five Haitians do not have access to urgently needed medical care.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which has provided health care in Haiti for over 30 years, suspended its operations in the capital in late November, due to attacks by "self-defense groups" on its ambulances, patients, and staff, as well as threats of death and rape against its personnel by some police officials. By the time of writing, MSF had only managed to restore the provision of some of their medical services.

Nearly half of Haitians aged 15 and older are illiterate. According to UNICEF, Haiti has around 3.9 million school-aged children. However, escalating violence led to the closure of nearly 1,000 private and public schools in the West and Artibonite departments during the 2023-2024 academic year, affecting 300,000 students. Moreover, the poor quality of public education, high private school fees, and criminal attacks on students and schools have deprived approximately 1.2 million Haitian children of access to education.

## Transitional Government and Elections

Following a political dialogue led by CARICOM, an intergovernmental organization in the Americas, The Caribbean and Atlantic Ocean, then-Prime Minister Ariel Henry resigned in late April, leading to the establishment of a Transitional Presidential Council. Garry Conille, former UNICEF Regional Director, was subsequently appointed as prime minister in late May. After five months in office, the Transitional Presidential Council dismissed Conille and replaced him with Alix Didier Fils-Aimé, a Haitian businessman.

The transitional government is tasked with restoring security, upholding the rule of law, urgently addressing the humanitarian crisis, and preparing for free and fair elections in 2026. Haiti has had no nationally elected officials since January 2023, and its parliament has been inactive since 2019.

The Provisional Electoral Council, tasked with organizing the elections, was established but had not yet set an electoral calendar at the time of writing.

## Justice System

The justice system remains at a near standstill, largely due to corruption, ongoing violence and frequent strikes by magistrates and judicial staff. Criminal groups have seized control of the main court buildings for over two years, and few measures have been taken to relocate the courts or provide security for judicial officials.

From October 2023 through October 2024, only 241 people received criminal trials countrywide, the non-governmental National Human Rights Defense Network (RNDDH) reported. Accountability for past and ongoing human rights violations, including massacres and sexual violence, remains nearly nonexistent. In a rare positive development, in late July 2024, a judge sent to trial 30 individuals, including former police officer and current criminal leader Jimmy Chérizier, for their alleged involvement in the 2018 La Saline massacre, which resulted in over 70 people killed, nearly a dozen women and girls raped, and the vandalization and burning of more than 150 homes.

In early January, another judge charged 51 individuals in connection with the assassination of the former president Jovenel Moïse. In the US, at least seven individuals have been sentenced in connection with the assassination and five more are scheduled to face trial in January 2025.

After criminal groups attacked two major prisons in Port-au-Prince and nearly 5,000 detainees, including several gang leaders, escaped, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Haiti (OHCHR) reported a rise in threats and attacks against journalists, human rights defenders, and government officials.

As of October, Haiti's prisons held nearly three times their capacity for detainees. Most of the 7,581 detainees—84 percent of whom were awaiting trial—were living in inhuman conditions, without access to adequate food, water, or health care. From January through October, 168 detainees died, most from malnutrition-related diseases.

In 2020, by presidential decree, new penal and criminal procedure codes which expanded alternatives to pretrial detention were adopted. Authorities postponed the implementation of the codes, expected to come into force in 2024.

## Police Conduct

Between January and September, police allegedly killed over 900 people and injured nearly 600 in operations, according to BINUH, some were reportedly killed or injured due to excessive use of force. The prosecutor in Miragoâne acknowledged that he was involved in 26 cases of extrajudicial executions; however, authorities are yet to investigate these cases.

The police internal affairs office opened 139 investigations, including 34 for alleged human rights violations from January through early October. Twenty-six investigations were completed, leading to 15 administrative decisions. Only two were sent for criminal prosecution.

## Access to Abortion

Haiti has a total ban on abortion. The new penal code will decriminalize abortion until the twelfth week of pregnancy, and at any time in cases of rape or incest, or when the mental or physical health of the pregnant person is in danger. The code was scheduled to come into force in 2024 but has been postponed by authorities.

## Disability Rights

Haiti acceded to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009, yet its legal framework still contains discriminatory provisions. According to the UN, 15 percent of the population has a disability, but no census has been conducted since 2003, according to the UN Population Fund. People with disabilities face significant barriers to accessing essential services and experience pervasive stigma.

BINUH, the Bureau du Secrétaire d'État à l'intégration des Personnes Handicapées, and local advocacy groups have raised alarms about the impact of criminal violence on people with disabilities.

## Internal Displacement and Migration

Nearly 703,000 Haitians, 25 percent children, are internally displaced. The total is more than double the 2022 figure, making Haiti the country with the highest global displacements per capita, due to crime-related violence, according to IOM. Most of the displaced live in informal settlements with insufficient access to food, water, sanitation, shelter, and medical care. Seventy five percent of these sites are located in areas controlled by criminal groups or high-risk zones, increasing their exposure to violence, according to the UN.

Many Haitians have fled the country, often through dangerous routes. From January through mid-December 2024, foreign governments returned nearly 200,000 people to Haiti despite the risk to their lives and physical integrity and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' call to extend refugee protection to Haitians under the 1984 Cartagena Declaration. The Dominican Republic was responsible for 97 percent of returns, while the US, the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, and Cuba account for the rest.

In June, the US government extended Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Haitians for 18 months, but Haitians continue to face challenges accessing the humanitarian parole program. Both Haitians with criminal convictions and those arriving after a cut-off date of July 2024 for temporary protected status were subject to removal to Haiti. Since October 2023, the US Coast Guard has intercepted 857 Haitians at sea and returned them to Haiti.

# Honduras

The administration of President Xiomara Castro has made little progress in fighting corruption and restoring democratic institutions. Honduras continues to struggle with widespread corruption, a compromised judiciary, high levels of violence, and attacks against environmental defenders.

## Judicial Independence and Corruption

In September, President Castro presented to the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres a second draft agreement to create an International Commission against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (CICIH). The revised proposal would ensure CICIH's independence and autonomy, allow it to independently prosecute cases, investigate high-profile cases, propose legislative changes, and train personnel to fight corruption. However, progress on establishing the CICIH remains slow.

As of September, UN experts have visited Honduras four times to provide technical assistance and assess the legal system and anti-corruption capabilities. They identified several laws that hinder investigations into corruption. Congress abrogated some of such laws, but a law prohibiting sanctions against legislators for actions taken "in the exercise of their duties" remained in place at time of writing.

In September, Carlos Zelaya, Castro's brother-in-law and a congressional leader, resigned after admitting to meeting with drug traffickers in 2013. Zelaya's son, who was minister of defense, also resigned.

A few days before Zelaya's resignation, Castro annulled an extradition treaty with the United States, which had allowed for the extradition of Honduran nationals accused of drug trafficking, including former President Juan Orlando Hernández, who was sentenced to 45 years in prison by a US federal court in March.

## Human Rights Defenders

Attacks on human rights defenders intensified in 2023. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Honduras reported that 453 human rights

defenders and journalists were harassed, threatened, or intimidated in 2023 and 15 were killed.

According to OHCHR, at least four human rights defenders were killed between January and September, including Juan López, an environmental defender, who was murdered in September, in the municipality of Tocoa, Colón department. Three activists working for the same environmental organization as López were killed in 2023.

The mechanism Honduras created in 2015 to protect journalists, human rights defenders, and justice officials has serious flaws: It lacks financial autonomy, qualified staff experienced in human rights issues, and trust from defenders.

## Land Rights

Land rights and natural resource disputes remain a pressing issue in Honduras, with Indigenous peoples, Afro-Honduran communities, and peasants disproportionately affected by violence, illegal land seizures, and forced displacement.

In September, Honduras' Supreme Court declared unconstitutional the laws permitting the creation of so-called Areas of Employment and Economic Development (ZEDEs), geographic areas in which private companies were granted broad governance powers, including to establish their own courts. Human Rights Watch criticized ZEDEs and called for their repeal. The court ruled that the ZEDE framework violated human rights.

Honduras Próspera Group Inc., a company which owns a ZEDE in Honduras, brought a case against Honduras before the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) for the repeal of the legal framework for special economic zones. Próspera filed for damages of US$10.7 billion, approximately 30 percent of Honduras' 2023 GDP. In February, Honduras denounced the ICSID Convention.

## Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

According to government data, in 2023, 64 percent of the population lived below the poverty line (down from 73.6 percent in 2021), and 41.5 percent lived in extreme poverty

(down from 53.7 percent in 2021). Honduras maintains one of the highest levels of income inequality in Latin America with a Gini index of 0.52 in 2023.

Illiteracy is a significant problem in Honduras. Over 31 percent of people aged 60 and older and over 13 percent of people over 15 years old could not read or write in 2023. Only 56 percent of children between 12 and 14, and 28 percent between 15 and 17, were attending school. School attendance rates are significantly lower in rural areas.

In July, Honduras co-sponsored a UN Human Rights Council resolution establishing a working group that would draft a new optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the rights to early childhood education, free pre-primary and secondary education.

## Public Security

Honduras has been for years among one of the most violent countries in the world, with police reporting 3,035 murders in 2023, a homicide rate of 31 per 100,000 people. Between January and September, preliminary police data indicated 1,854 murders, a 26 percent drop compared to the same period in 2023.

According to the latest data from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Honduras has the highest rate of femicides in Latin America and the Caribbean, with approximately 7 femicides per 100,000 women.

A state of emergency, adopted in December 2022 to fight extortion and related crimes, was extended 15 times and remains in place. It suspends the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly and to be informed of the reason for arrest, among others. OHCHR and the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern about the extended use of the emergency without a comprehensive, rights-based security policy, saying it resulted in abuses.

Structural problems in the penitentiary system persist, including overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure. As of September, prisons held over 19,000 detainees, 21 percent more than their capacity. Almost half of the people were in pretrial detention,

official statistics show. In June, Castro announced the creation of a new "megaprison" for 20,000 people.

## Migration, Asylum, and Internal Displacement

As of 2023, there were 216,000 Honduran asylum seekers abroad, mostly in the United States and Mexico, with 84,000 others recognized as refugees.

Gang violence and other factors, including climate change, caused the internal displacement of about 247,000 people between 2019 and 2024, government data shows.

## Access to Abortion and Emergency Contraception

Abortion in Honduras is banned in all circumstances, including when the life of a woman, girl or pregnant person is in danger. People who have abortions, and those who provide them, face up to six years in prison.

In December 2022, President Castro approved a protocol to guide health centers in caring for survivors of sexual violence, including access to emergency contraception. The president signed an executive order in March 2023 lifting the ban on the use and sale of emergency contraception, but the Strategic Group on Emergency Contraception (Grupo Estratégico PAE), a reproductive rights group, reported that emergency contraception remains unavailable in the public health system, access is not free, and the protocol for survivors has yet to be implemented.

In April, the Center for Reproductive Rights and Centro de Derechos de la Mujer, two women's rights organizations, brought a case before the UN Human Rights Committee on behalf of Fausia, an Indigenous Honduran woman who became pregnant after being raped in retaliation for her human rights work. Under Honduras' total ban on abortion and, at the time, emergency contraception, she was forced to proceed with her pregnancy and faced threats while seeking medical assistance.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in Honduras continue to suffer high levels of violence and discrimination in all areas of life, forcing some to flee. Honduras has

failed to comply with key measures ordered by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2021, including to create a legal gender recognition procedure for transgender people. Honduras does not allow same-sex marriage and lacks comprehensive anti-LGBT discrimination legislation.

# Hungary

The government's assault on the rule of law and democratic institutions continued in 2024 with a controversial law that gives a government-appointed body broad powers that can be used to harass civil society and independent media. The government also faced a political crisis following a presidential pardon in a child sexual abuse scandal that led the president and justice minister to resign and triggered countrywide protests.

Other prominent rights concerns in Hungary include ongoing unlawful pushbacks of migrants and asylum seekers at Hungary's border with Serbia, and discrimination against and demonization of LGBT people, women and girls, and minority groups.

## Attacks on Rule of Law and Public Institutions

The government continues to exercise extraordinary powers pursuant to a "state of danger" decree issued in 2022 following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which replaced a Covid-19 "state of danger" declared in 2020. The emergency powers enable the government to rule by decree and override any act of parliament. A separate emergency decree has been in force since 2015 over a "state of crisis due to mass migration." The government has misused its excessive powers, among other things, to overrule judicial decisions and restrict teachers' right to strike.

In February, a controversial Defence of National Sovereignty law entered into force, establishing a new Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO) with unchecked power to access government and intelligence data and investigate anyone deemed a threat to Hungary's sovereignty or national security. In September 2023, the parliamentary leader of the ruling party Fidesz had said the law would be used against "foreign-funded journalists, pseudo NGOs and dollar-funded politicians." In June 2024, Transparency International Hungary and independent news site *Atlatszo* came under investigation by the new office. The European Commission in October referred Hungary to the EU Court of Justice (CJEU), saying the law and SPO violated several provisions of EU law. The Council of Europe's Venice Commission also in March called on Hungary to repeal the law as it relates to the Sovereignty Protection Office.

In April, parliament passed a law that undermines the independence of courts, the prosecution service, and investigative bodies overseen by the prosecution service. The law, according to the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, allows the Ministry of Justice to acquire protected information it would not normally have access to, and interfere in and influence court proceedings.

In August, authorities revoked the operational licenses for three schools run by the Methodist Evangelical Church (MET) serving predominantly socioeconomically underprivileged and otherwise marginalized children. The government has repeatedly attacked MET, starting with the stripping of its church status in 2011 through a constitutional amendment, resulting in loss of tax subsidies for its programs. The deregistration of the MET was ruled unlawful by both the Hungarian Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights.

## Freedom of Media

The Hungarian government continues to severely restrict media freedom and pluralism, including through its control of the media regulatory body and political interference with the public service broadcaster. Journalists have difficulties accessing public information and continue to face smear campaigns by pro-government media and public officials. In June, as noted above, the new Sovereignty Protection Office launched an investigation into independent investigative media outlet *Atlatszo*.

Also in June, police and counterterrorism officials interfered with the work of journalists from independent online news site *Telex.hu*, preventing them from reporting from a public gathering where they had hoped to interview Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto.

Throughout the year, local authorities in Fidesz-run cities and communities prevented two stand-up comedians and political satirists from performing, with one local government official stating that political parodies were not allowed.

## Attacks on Civil Society

Pro-government media and government officials continued their attacks on civil society organizations. In June, SPO made baseless allegations that Transparency International Hungary was supporting foreign activities which “influence the decisions by the

electorate." Transparency International filed a complaint asking the Constitutional Court to declare the creation and operations of the office unconstitutional.

In September, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Michael O'Flaherty submitted a third party intervention in a case before the European Court of Human Rights lodged by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee concerning the criminalization of civil society activities aiding asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants. The commissioner stated that Hungary's criminalization of such activities violates the European Convention on Human Rights' provisions on freedom of association and assembly.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people continue to face discrimination and demonization.

In September, the Advocate General of the CJEU issued an opinion calling on Hungarian authorities to correct a transgender refugee's gender marker in national registries. A 2020 law banned transgender or intersex people from legally changing their gender. In 2021, the Constitutional Court ruled that the ban does not apply to trans people who started their legal process before May 2020, allowing some and preventing other trans people from changing their markers.

## Women's and Girls' Reproductive Rights

The government continues to ban over-the-counter emergency contraception in violation of women's and girls' right to health. As a result, women and girls must see a doctor to procure emergency contraception, even in cases of sexual assault, which may delay or prevent them from getting the care they need.

## Discrimination against Roma

Discrimination against Roma in education, health care, and employment persists. In March, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, which monitors the implementation of European Court of Human Rights judgments, found that Hungary was failing to address school segregation of Romani children.

## Migrants and Asylum Seekers

Access to Hungary's asylum procedure remained virtually impossible following a 2020 law preventing most asylum seekers from lodging protection claims in Hungary.

According to police data cited by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 5,491,181 crossings from Ukraine to Hungary took place between February 24, 2022, and September 2, 2024. By July 2024, 46,149 people in Hungary had registered for temporary protection under the EU Temporary Protection Directive triggered by Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine.

In August, a government decree terminated shelter support to certain Ukrainian refugees from places in Ukraine not considered war-torn areas by the government, leaving thousands homeless. The majority of the approximately 3,000 people affected are Transcarpathian Roma (from western Ukraine), many of them children.

Authorities continue to unlawfully push migrants and asylum seekers back to Serbia, sometimes violently. The number of "arrests and escorts across the fence" significantly dropped from 58,000 to 1,830 between January and August 2024, compared to the same period in 2023, as Serbian law enforcement moved migrants to reception facilities in other regions.

In June, the European Court of Human Rights in three separate cases ruled that Hungary had unlawfully detained and starved asylum seekers in 2019 and 2017, including a 5-year-old child, in the then-operational transit zone set up at the Serbian border.

In March, the European Court of Human Rights ruled unlawful Hungary's six-month arbitrary detention of a Syrian woman fleeing war and forced marriage.

The CJEU in June ordered Hungary to pay a €200 million fine for its on-going restrictions on the right to asylum, saying that the government committed an "unprecedent and exceptionally serious breach of EU law." The court also stated that Hungary must pay an additional penalty of €1 million per day if it fails to make its September payment deadline. The money will be drawn from Hungary's allocated share of the EU budget, parts still frozen over other rule of law abuses. At this writing, Hungary had still not paid the fine.

## International Justice

In July, Prime Minister Orbán met with Russian President Putin in Moscow despite an ICC arrest warrant against Putin over the unlawful deportation and transfer of Ukrainian

children to Russia. EU institutions and member states condemned the meeting, with the European Parliament calling it a "blatant violation of the EU's treaties and common foreign policy." By meeting Putin, Orbán did not respect the EU's common policy to cooperate with the ICC, which states that "the EU and its Member States should avoid non-essential contacts with individuals subject to an arrest warrant issued by the ICC."

# India

Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a third term in office in June 2024. The authorities continued to discriminate against members of minority communities. Officials failed to take adequate action against BJP supporters responsible for attacks, and instead targeted victims of the violence, including through unlawful demolitions of Muslim homes and properties. Government critics faced politically motivated prosecutions under tax and foreign funding regulations, and the draconian counterterrorism law.

Indian authorities failed to end the ethnic violence in the northeast state of Manipur, which has killed over 200 people and displaced more than 60,000 since May 2023.

Several foreign governments accused Indian intelligence agencies of targeting terrorism suspects and separatist leaders for assassination in Canada, the United States, and Pakistan. In October 2024, Canada's national police service issued a public statement on the alleged role of Indian state agents in criminal activity on Canadian soil, including homicide, extortion, and other violence. Indian authorities also canceled visas or denied entry to government critics, including members of the diaspora.

Despite the Modi administration's deteriorating human rights record, several countries strengthened strategic and economic ties with India. However, in January the European Parliament adopted a resolution that raised urgent human rights concerns, including "violence, increasing nationalistic rhetoric and divisive policies" against minorities. In May, for a second consecutive year, the United Nations-linked Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions deferred accreditation to India's National Human Rights Commission.

## Jammu and Kashmir

In September, the Indian government held elections for a regional government in Jammu and Kashmir for the first time since revoking its special autonomous status in August 2019. While the government claimed that it had restored peace and security in the region, many Kashmiris said that they were voting against the continued restrictions on basic freedoms.

The Jammu region, considered relatively more peaceful, saw a spike in violence between May and July, leading to the death of 15 soldiers and 9 civilians. As of September, there were 40 reported attacks in Jammu and Kashmir, in which 18 civilians, 20 security force personnel, and 39 suspected militants were killed.

In March, demonstrators in the now separate territory of Ladakh demanded a greater participation in governance. In October, Indian authorities arbitrarily detained the prominent climate activist Sonam Wangchuk and 120 others from Ladakh, who had walked for 30 days, covering nearly 1,000-kilometers, from Leh, the provincial capital, to Delhi. The activists, demanding a greater say in local governance and stronger environmental safeguards, were released after 36 hours.

Religious minorities and migrant workers faced risk of targeted attacks while hundreds of Kashmiris, including journalists and human rights activists, remained in custody. Kashmiri human rights defender Khurram Parvez has been jailed since November 2021 under the Unlawful Activities Prevention of Atrocities Act (UAPA), India's draconian counterterrorism law.

Journalists in Kashmir continued to be at risk of police interrogation, raids, threats, physical assault, restrictions on movement, and fabricated criminal cases. In June, authorities introduced a policy to protect public officials in the region from alleged false complaints and recommended punishing media publications complicit in spreading so-called misinformation, raising concerns over government accountability and threats to media freedom.

In several cases, the police kept people in custody by filing new allegations after courts granted them bail or quashed detention orders. In March, authorities filed a new UAPA case to rearrest Aasif Sultan, a Kashmiri journalist released after spending more than five years in prison.

## Impunity for Security Forces

Allegations of torture and extrajudicial killings persisted, with the National Human Rights Commission registering 121 deaths in police custody, 1,558 deaths in judicial custody, and 93 alleged extrajudicial killings in the first nine months in 2024.

The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act remained in effect in Jammu and Kashmir and several northeastern states, providing effective immunity from prosecution to security forces, even for serious human rights abuses.

In September, the Bangladeshi government strongly condemned the killing of two persons at the India-Bangladesh border allegedly by India's Border Security Force (BSF). The BSF has frequently used excessive force along the Bangladeshi border with impunity, targeting both Indians as well as irregular immigrants and cattle traders from Bangladesh.

## Attacks on Religious and Ethnic Minorities, Dalits, and Tribal Groups

Prime Minister Modi's electoral campaign frequently used hate speech against Muslims and other minorities, inciting discrimination, hostility and violence against them.

Between June and August, there was a surge in violence by Hindu vigilantes, assaulting Muslim men on suspicions of consuming beef or transporting cattle for slaughter. In August, local Hindus in Haryana killed a 26-year-old Muslim migrant worker from West Bengal for allegedly consuming beef. In Maharashtra, a 72-year-old Muslim man was harassed and beaten on a train over suspicions of carrying beef. In August, Hindu vigilantes shot dead a 19-year-old Hindu teenager, suspecting him of being Muslim and smuggling cows.

Several BJP state governments demolished Muslims' homes, businesses, and places of worship without due process and carried out other unlawful practices. BJP leaders dubbed these demolitions, often carried out as apparent collective punishment against the Muslim community for communal clashes or dissent, as "bulldozer justice." In June, Madhya Pradesh authorities demolished 11 Muslim houses in Mandla district, saying they had found beef in their refrigerators, as well as animal hides and skeletal remains of cattle. In November, the Supreme Court ruled such demolitions were illegal and laid down guidelines to ensure adequate due process prior to homes being demolished.

Christians in several BJP-run states risked attacks by Hindu mobs over allegations of "illegal conversions." In July, a group of Hindu men attacked a pastor in Chhattisgarh state. A militant mob attacked a prayer congregation in Madhya Pradesh state, beating up men and children. At least 12 of India's 28 states have laws forbidding forced religious

conversion that have been used by the authorities to harass religious minorities, especially Christians from Dalit and Adivasi communities, and have emboldened vigilante violence.

Dalits continued to face systemic violence and caste-based discrimination. In July, three young men in Uttar Pradesh forced a 15-year old Dalit boy to drink urine. In August, railway police officials in Madhya Pradesh beat a Dalit woman and her 15-year-old grandson. The rape of a 20-year old Dalit nurse by a doctor in a private hospital in Uttar Pradesh in August once again spotlighted that Dalit women and girls are at heightened risk of sexual violence.

The BJP government in Chhattisgarh state, home to many tribal communities, escalated counterinsurgency operations against Maoist rebels, leading to abuses against villagers and allegations of extrajudicial killings. The authorities continued to target human rights activists, including on politically motivated charges, accusing them of being Maoists or Maoist supporters.

In September, renewed ethnic violence in Manipur between armed groups from the predominantly Christian Kuki-Zo community and the mostly Hindu Meitei community reportedly killed at least 11 people. Students and others protested the violence, and some clashed with security forces and attacked government buildings. Instead of protecting vulnerable communities and upholding the rule of law, the BJP-run state government deepened longstanding anger and distrust among the communities through polarizing policies.

In July, the UN Human Rights Committee, following its review of India's compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, raised concerns about discrimination and violence against minority communities including religious minorities, Dalits, and tribal groups.

## Civil Society and Freedom of Association

Indian authorities used abusive foreign funding laws such as the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), counterterrorism laws, trumped-up financial investigations, and other means to unlawfully attack civil society groups and activists. In February, the Central Bureau of Investigation raided the home and offices of Harsh Mander, a prominent human rights activist. In January, the authorities canceled the FCRA licenses of the research

institution, the Centre for Policy Researchand the Christian charity World Vision India, which provides humanitarian support to children in low-income communities.

In June, the Financial Action Task Force, an intergovernmental organization that works to combat threats to the global financial system, recommended that India put in place measures to prevent the abuse of counterterrorism policies against nongovernmental groups.

In July, the Indian government enforced three new criminal laws, replacing the Indian penal code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Indian Evidence Act. The new laws expand police powers, raising concerns about the rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, and a fair trial.

## Freedom of Expression

The government censored peaceful expression online through arbitrary and disproportionate orders to block websites or suspend social media accounts. In January, the authorities blocked the websites of Hindutva Watch and India Hate Lab, which document hate speech and attacks on India's religious minorities. In February, following a protest by farmers in Haryana and Punjab, the authorities blocked dozens of social media accounts, most of them belonging to journalists reporting on the protests, farmers, union leaders, and others supporting the movement.

The Indian government revoked visa privileges of foreign journalists working in India and foreign citizens of Indian origin who were critical of the government or its policies. As of June, three foreign journalists claimed they were forced to leave India after the government refused to renew their work permits.

Indian authorities continued to impose the largest number of internet shutdowns globally, violating Indian law and international human rights standards. The shutdowns disproportionately hurt socially and economically marginalized communities by denying them access to free or subsidized food rations and livelihoods.

In September, in a win for free speech, the Bombay High Court struck down a 2023 amendment to the Information Technology Rules that empowered the government to

establish a fact-checking unit to identify and order the takedown of any online information about itself that it deemed to be false or misleading.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

The rape and murder of a 31-year old doctor in a government hospital in Kolkata city in August prompted widespread protests demanding justice and better security and facilities at medical campuses and hospitals. The attack cast a spotlight on how millions of Indian women remain exposed to abuse in the workplace and continue to face severe barriers to justice for sexual violence.

India has laws to address violence against women and protect them from sexual harassment in the workplace. However, the authorities have failed to effectively enforce the law or ensure complaint committees tackle sexual harassment in both the formal and informal sectors.

## Disability Rights

People with disabilities continued to be warehoused in institutions across India. In July, 14 people living in Asha Kiran, a government-run shelter in Delhi, died within 20 days, raising concerns about the living conditions and quality of drinking water and food. As of August, 27 residents had died in the institution since the beginning of 2024.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In September, the central government announced several measures toward inclusion of couples regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. These included a directive to treat partners in LGBTQI+ relationships as part of the same household for issuing ration cards, no restrictions on opening a joint bank account, and nominating a partner to receive the account's balance in case of death.

The measures follow an October 2023 Supreme Court ruling that failed to legalize same-sex marriage, but directed the formation of a high-level committee to study rights and entitlements for the LGBTQI+ community.

## Refugee Rights

Rohingya Muslim refugees in India faced tightened restrictions, arbitrary detention, violent attacks often incited by political leaders, and a heightened risk of forced returns. Indian authorities continued to detain hundreds of Rohingya refugees, prompting the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to call on the government in July to end their arbitrary detention and refrain from their forcible deportation and return to Myanmar.

In May, the Indian government granted the first set of citizenship certificates under the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which the parliament had enacted in 2019. The law fast-tracks citizenship requests from non-Muslims fleeing religious persecution from India's Muslim-majority neighbors—Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh—but excludes Muslim refugees from those countries.

# Indonesia

Prabowo Subianto Djojohadikusumo, a former Army general, won the presidential election in February 2024. Prabowo was implicated in grave rights violations while he was in military service that had led to his dismissal. His running mate, Gibran Raka, is the eldest son of outgoing President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo.

In August, street protests erupted in at least 16 cities in Indonesia, including the capital, Jakarta, after Jokowi's ruling coalition attempted to tamper with the election law to allow candidates below age 30 to run for office in local elections. The protesters accused the government of nepotism because there was only one candidate under 30: Kaesang Pangareb, Jokowi's youngest son. Earlier, Jokowi had helped Gibran Raka to become Prabowo's running mate.

Civil and political rights declined in Indonesia in the past decade under the Jokowi administration. The government's policies undermined free elections, weakened legislative checks on executive powers, and led to an increase in corruption, including in the management of natural resources. The armed forces interfered in civilian affairs.

Indonesia's parliament passed a new criminal code in December 2022, containing provisions that seriously violate international human rights law and standards.

Indonesian authorities committed or condoned numerous human rights abuses involving discrimination on religious, ethnic, social, gender, and sexual orientation grounds.

## West Papua

Military and police committed abuses with impunity in West Papua. Despite pledges by Jokowi, authorities restricted access to the media, international diplomats, and human rights monitors.

Authorities failed to address longstanding racial discrimination against Indigenous Papuans despite protests across 33 cities in 2019, after an attack on Papuan university students by security forces in Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city. This includes denial of their rights to health, livelihood, and education.

While at least 245 people were convicted for participating in protests, including 109 for treason, they were given much shorter prison terms due to international and domestic pressure. Most had been released by 2024 because they had already served much of their term in pre-trial detention. Three fishermen from Manokwari, who were convicted of treason for unfurling the Morning Star and holding a protest prayer meeting in October 2022, were released in September.

After the Indonesian parliament enacted a controversial law in 2022, splitting the territory of two provinces—Papua and West Papua—into six new provinces, the authorities continued to encourage and subsidize thousands of non-Papuan settler families—*pendatang* in Indonesian—to relocate to West Papua, often driving out Indigenous Papuans and grabbing their land for mining and oil palm plantations.

A video posted in March on social media showed three Indonesian soldiers brutally beating Definus Kogoya, a young Papuan man, whose hands were tied behind him and who had been placed inside a drum filled with water, taunting him with racial slurs. While the army apologized and promised an investigation, there have been no prosecutions.

The fighting between pro-independence Papuan insurgents and the Indonesian security forces contributed to the deteriorating human rights situation in West Papua. The insurgents are implicated in the killings of migrants and foreign workers. They held a New Zealand pilot, Philip Mehrtens, hostage between February 2023 and September 2024, releasing him after 594 days on "humanitarian grounds."

## Freedom of Religion and Belief

Several laws such as the 1965 blasphemy law, blasphemy provisions in the 2022 criminal code, and the 2006 religious harmony regulation placed religious minorities at risk. While these rules seemed to be neutral on paper, they were enforced mostly "to protect Islam."

The 2006 regulation continued to empower religious majorities to veto activities by minority religions including Christians, Shia Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians or to stop them from constructing houses of worship. Smaller minorities, including Ahmadiyah, Bah'ai, and Indigenous faiths, continue to face even harsher treatment.

Indonesian authorities did too little to stop Islamic groups attacking or harassing religious minorities or to hold those responsible to account. For instance, in March, dozens of Muslim extremists attacked a religious service held by a Christian group in Tangerang, claiming it had "no permit" to conduct services.

In September, Pope Francis visited Jakarta as part of a 12-day tour of the Asia-Pacific region. He visited the Istiqlal grand mosque and met the grand imam, signing a declaration of interfaith friendship.

In a step forward for freedom of religion and belief in Indonesia, in January, citizens from smaller religious groups were permitted to change the religious identity on their identity cards, with the introduction of a new category, *kepercayaan* (belief), alongside the six recognized religions.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

Local authorities continued to enforce 73 mandatory hijab regulations since they were first introduced in West Sumatra in 2001, with sanctions ranging from verbal warnings, expulsion from school or work, to jail terms of up to three months. Many girls and women who refused to comply with the rules, including non-Muslims, faced expulsion or pressure to withdraw from school. In several cases, female civil servants, including teachers and university lecturers, lost their jobs or had to resign for refusing to comply with the rules.

The new criminal code maintains criminalization of abortion with exceptions, and now criminalizes distributing information about contraceptives to children, and providing information about obtaining an abortion to anyone.

## Restrictions on Civil Society and Media

In June, a journalist who had exposed an army officer for allegedly backing online gambling was killed in a deadly arson attack. Rico Sempurna Pasaribu, 47, of the Medan-based Tribata TV, and three members of his family were found dead inside their small wooden house in Kabanjahe. Media organizations said they feared a cover-up in the investigations.

In March, Indonesian authorities signed an agreement ending the requirement that defamation disputes with student media should be referred to the police or public

prosecutors. Instead, the national Press Council will now mediate all defamation disputes involving student journalists and publications.

## Disability Rights

People with real or perceived psychosocial disabilities continued to be shackled—chained or locked in confined spaces—due to stigma, as well as inadequate support and mental health services. The 2024 US State Department annual human rights report stated that the Indonesian government prioritized eliminating the practice of shackling. The number of people living in chains was approximately 4,300.

# Iran

In May, Ebrahim Raeesi, the former Iranian president, was killed in a helicopter crash in Iran's East Azerbaijan province, which led to an early election in June that put Masoud Pezeshkian as the new President of Iran in office. Iranian authorities continued to repress all forms of peaceful dissent and political protest. The crackdown targeted women human rights defenders, members of ethnic and religious minorities, and family members of some of those arrested or killed in the 2022 anti-government protests. Additionally, there was an alarming increase in executions.

A report by Human Rights Watch found that Iranian authorities are carrying out the crime against humanity of persecution against Baha'is in Iran. Authorities expanded penalties for women violating the country's discriminatory dress codes, trials remain unfair, and impunity for serious human rights abuses endures.

Amidst an escalation of hostilities in Israel, Gaza and Lebanon, Iran and Israel launched tit-for-tat attacks, apparently against military targets.

## Executions

Iran remains one of the world's top practitioners of the death penalty, applying it to individuals convicted of crimes committed as children, in cases of individuals charged with vague national security charges, and has sometimes used it for non-violent offenses. Iran was among the five countries with the highest number of executions in 2023 and the number of executions has remained high in 2024. A UN statement said that in the first half of the 2024 alone, Iranian authorities executed more than 400 people. On August 7, the authorities carried out mass executions of 29 prisoners at two prisons; 26 people were executed at Ghezel Hesar prison and 3 people at Karaj Central prison. Those executed included 17 people sentenced for "premeditated murder," 7 convicted on drug-related charges, and 2 Afghan nationals sentenced for rape.

On August 6, Iranian authorities also executed Reza (Gholamreza) Rasaei, a Kurdish protester of the Yarsani faith, at Dizelabad prison in Kermanshah province, without giving prior notice to his family or allowing Rasaei a final meeting with them. Security

forces arrested Rasaei in November 2022, during protests in Shahriar, Tehran. He was sentenced to death for his alleged role in the "premeditated murder" of Nader Birami, the former head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Intelligence Organization in Sahneh.

On July 4, Iran's revolutionary courts informed the husband of Sharifeh Mohammedi, a labor activist, that Mohammedi had been sentenced to death on the charge of "armed rebellion against the state," based on an allegation of membership in an opposition group. She had reportedly been a member of the Association of Labor Organizations until 2013.

On July 23, Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court reportedly sentenced Pakhshan Azizi, a Kurdish political prisoner in Evin prison, to death on charges of "armed rebellion against the state." Her trial took place on May 28. Authorities denied her access to a lawyer and family visits during four months of interrogation. Azizi had previously been arrested in 2009 and released on bail after four months.

## Freedom of Assembly and Expression, Right to Participate in the Conduct of Public Affairs

Iranian authorities continue to severely restrict freedoms of assembly and expression. In 2024, security forces arrested dozens of activists, lawyers, and students. The authorities also targeted outspoken family members of those killed or executed during the 2022 protests who were demanding accountability for violations against their loved ones.

University administrators continued their crackdown on students' free expression. Human Rights Watch compiled cases of at least 30 university students subjected to university disciplinary measures at universities across the country in the last year for peaceful speech. The actual number is most likely higher.

On August 29, Shargh Daily reported that President Pezeshkian, who was elected in July, asked Mohammad Reza Zafarghandi, the Minister of Health and Medical Education, to review the cases of all professors dismissed or whose contracts were terminated and to reinstate dismissed students expelled from universities after the 2022 "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests. On September 16, Zafarghandi, ordered the suspension of all rulings against students suspended in the last two years.

On April 4, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) voted to extend the mandate of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran to "thoroughly and independently investigate alleged human rights violations in the Islamic Republic of Iran related to the protests that began on 16 September 2022, especially with respect to women and children." The fact-finding mission published its full report in March 2024 before the renewal of its mandate. On April 4, the HRC also voted for the continuation of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran.of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran.

## Rape, Torture, Persecution, and Lethal Force against Ethnic and Religious Minorities

The cumulative impact of authorities' decades-long systematic repression against Baha'is is an intentional and severe deprivation of their fundamental rights and amounts to the crime against humanity of persecution. Iranian authorities have targeted Baha'i women and, in 2024, two-thirds of imprisoned Baha'is were women, according to the Baha'i International Community (BIC), which represents the Baha'i community worldwide. Dozens of Baha'is were arrested, put on trial, and sentenced to prison on charges such as "propaganda against the state" and "participation in conducting misleading propaganda and educational activities contrary to the sacred laws of Islam."

Human Rights Watch documented the rape, torture, and sexual assault of ten detainees, both female and male, from Kurdish, Baluch, and Azeri minority regions that occurred between September and November 2022 during the nationwide protests. Detainees described being raped by security forces and some said they witnessed security forces raping other detainees. In seven of the cases, detainees said that security forces had tortured them to coerce them into making confessions.

The Iranian government also discriminates against some religious minorities, including Sunni Muslims, and restricts cultural and political activities among the country's Azeri, Kurdish, Arab, and Baluch ethnic minorities.

Human Rights Watch documented the authorities' use of excessive and lethal force against predominantly Kurdish border couriers, known as Kulbars, who transport goods between Iran and Iraq over rugged terrain. Driven by poverty, border couriers confront constant

dangers. The couriers have limited access to justice or remedy for violations, and Iranian authorities have mistreated those they have detained.

## Women's and Girl's Rights

Iranian authorities have intensified efforts to enforce compulsory hijab laws. They prosecuted women and girls, including celebrities, for not wearing the hijab in public; issued traffic citations to passengers without hijab; and closed businesses that did not comply with hijab laws.

On September 21, 2023, the Iranian parliament approved a draft "Hijab and Chastity" bill and agreed to a three-year pilot implementation. The Guardian Council approved the bill in September 2024. The bill has 71 articles that propose additional penalties, including fines, increased prison terms, and restrictions on job and educational opportunities for hijab violations. The law also expands the authority of intelligence and law enforcement agencies in enforcing compulsory hijab.

Women face deep discrimination in personal status matters related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and decisions relating to children. Under the civil code, a husband has the right to choose the family's place of living and can bar his wife from certain occupations if he deems them against "family values." Under the Passports Law, a married woman may not obtain a passport or travel outside the country without the written permission of her husband, who can revoke such permission at any time. The civil code allows girls to marry at age 13 and boys at age 15, and at younger ages if authorized by a judge.

Cases of femicide are increasingly being reported in the media and social media, and Iran has no law on domestic violence to prevent abuse and protect survivors. Reports show that between March 20 and June 20, at least 35 women and girls have been killed by their male family members in different cities in Iran, five of whom were in Tehran. In the first half of 2024, Stop Femicide Iran (SFI) documented 93 acts of femicide in Iran compared to 55 acts during the same period in 2023, a near 60 percent increase.

## Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society Activists

Scores of human rights defenders, many of them women, remain behind bars while authorities continue to harass, arrest, and prosecute those seeking accountability and

justice. Iranian authorities have intensified their crackdown on women activists and human rights defenders, employing harsher measures and issuing severe sentences to suppress dissent and silence opposition voices. This includes sentencing 11 women's rights and political activists to prison terms on March 27.

On September 16, Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) reported that Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced eight defendants to over 42 years in prison, flogging, and exile, on charges including "destruction of public property with the intent to disrupt public order and security," "opposition to the Islamic government," and "assembly and collusion." Niloufar Hamedi and Elaheh Mohammadi, two journalists from *Shargh* and *Ham-Mihan* Iranian newspapers who were among the first journalists who reported on Amini's death, were arrested in September 2022. On August 11, their lawyers announced that the Tehran court of appeals sentenced each to six years in prison. Previously, they had received a combined sentence of 25 years in prison in the first instance court.

## Due Process Rights, Fair Trial Standards, and Prison Conditions

Iranian courts, and particularly revolutionary courts, regularly fall far short of providing fair trials and use confessions likely obtained under torture as evidence. Authorities have failed to meaningfully investigate numerous allegations of rape and torture against detainees and routinely restrict detainees' access to legal counsel, particularly during the initial investigation period.

Iranian authorities' violations of due process rights and fair trial standards, as well as torture and ill-treatment of detainees, have been systemic features of the government's crackdown on anti-government protests. Revolutionary court judges have persistently failed to consider allegations of torture and ill-treatment, including in trials where defendants were sentenced to the death penalty.

On August 29, HRANA reported that political prisoner Mahmoud Sadeghi attempted suicide by cutting his wrist in Adelabad prison in Shiraz. A source told HRANA that Sadeghi attempted suicide because of harsh conditions in solitary confinement. After receiving treatment, he was placed alongside violent offenders, disregarding the principle of separating prisoners by crime.

## Treatment of Refugees and Migrants

Afghans in Iran are facing increasing pressure as their presence in the country is politicized and used as a scapegoat for social tensions. Many Afghans who fled to Iran after the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan do not have legal residency, making them vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation, and deportation.

On August 11, the proposal to add five clauses to Article 16 of the Law on the Entry and Residence of Foreign Nationals in Iran was introduced in the Iranian parliament. This proposal includes measures for deporting unauthorized foreign nationals and regulating their population distribution, limiting it to 3 percent of local population. The proposal mandates a 10 percent annual reduction in foreign residents as well as imposing fines for hiring unauthorized foreign nationals or employing them in unauthorized jobs. The proposal is under review and will be implemented once approved by the relevant bodies.

In September, Ahmadreza Radan, the Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian National Police, said that "nearly two million individuals are expected to be expelled from the country this year."

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Under Iranian law, same-sex conduct is punishable by flogging and, for men, the death penalty. Although Iran permits and subsidizes sex reassignment surgery for transgender people, no law prohibits discrimination against them.

# Iraq

While Iraq continued to enjoy increased security and stability in 2024 following decades of armed conflict, impunity and a lack of justice and accountability for serious crimes, shrinking civic space, flaws in the justice system, discriminatory legal norms disproportionately impacting LGBT people, women, children, and minorities, and inadequate provision of government services remained key areas of concern.

In August, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani launched Iraq's National Development Plan (2024-2028), focusing on improving services, developing oil and gas, and initiating projects aligned with the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Vision. However, ongoing disputes between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the federal Iraqi government over oil revenue, the payment of government salaries, and delayed regional elections have intensified political polarization.

Authorities also ramped up attacks on Iraqi's rights by passing or attempting to pass draconian laws that would restrict their freedoms. These include a law criminalizing homosexuality, passed in April, a draft amendment to the Personal Status Law, and a draft law on the right to information. Violent repression of protesters and arrests of journalists covering protests continued in 2024.

Throughout the year, Türkiye increased its military operations in federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). According to the NGO Community Peacemaker Teams, the Turkish military advanced 15 kilometers into Dohuk governorate, resulting in the displacement of the population of at least 162 villages and the destruction of civilian property. Turkish drone strikes allegedly killed three journalists and eight civilians in 2024.

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a coalition of Iraqi militias with links to Iran, claimed responsibility for around 200 attacks on US military bases in Iraq, Syria, and Israel that it says were conducted in retaliation for US support for Israel amid hostilities in Gaza. Reuters reported in September that the US and Iraq have reached an understanding that would lead to the withdrawal of the remaining 2,500 US troops in Iraq by the end of 2026. In January, Iranian ballistic missile struck a home in Erbil, killing four civilians and injuring

six others. Iranian authorities claimed the attacks targeted a "Mossad espionage center," a reference to Israel's intelligence agency, a claim the KRG categorically rejected.

## Women's Rights

Women and girls in Iraq continued to struggle against patriarchal norms embedded in Iraq's legal system. Iraq's penal code enables impunity for male violence against women, including provisions that allow the husband to punish his wife, parents to discipline their children, and mitigated sentences for violent acts including murder for so-called "honorable motives." The penal code also allows perpetrators of rape or sexual assault to escape prosecution or have their sentences quashed if they marry their victim.

Iraq's parliament debated an amendment to the country's Personal Status Law that would allow Iraqi religious authorities, rather than state law, to govern marriage and inheritance matters at the expense of fundamental rights. If passed, the amendment would have disastrous effects on women's and girls' rights as guaranteed under international law and would undermine the principle of equality under Iraqi law by removing protections for women regarding divorce and inheritance.

The draft amendment would also authenticate unregistered marriages, which are conducted by religious leaders but not registered with personal status courts and are illegal under the current Personal Status Law. The amendment would also remove criminal punishments for men entering these marriages and allow religious leaders, rather than the courts, to finalize marriages.

Unregistered marriages are already a loophole enabling child marriage in Iraq, where child marriage rates have been rising over the last 20 years. Unregistered marriages also have extremely harmful effects on women and girls' ability to obtain government services and social services linked to their civil status, obtain birth certificates for their children, or claim their rights to dowry, spousal maintenance, and inheritance.

Iraq's parliament failed once again to pass a long-awaited anti-domestic violence law. This law has been stalled for over a decade despite persistent advocacy from civil society groups and women's rights organizations. Survivors of gender-based violence had limited access to shelter or justice. While there were a small number of underground shelters for

women in federal Iraq, run by local NGOs, they were not widely supported, but often criticized, and over the years they have been attacked by families and raided by authorities.

A report by Amnesty International found that survivors of gender-based violence in the KRI faced significant obstacles in accessing justice and protection despite state-established reporting and protection institutions and a law criminalizing domestic violence that has been on the books for 13 years. The few government shelters in the KRI only allowed women to enter or leave with court orders.

## Children's Rights

Child marriage rates in Iraq have been steadily rising since 2003. Iraq's Personal Status Law sets the legal marriage age at 18, but allows marriage at 15 with a judge's approval, based on the child's "maturity and physical capacity," a provision that violates international legal standards and best practices. The draft amendment to the Personal Status Law would legalize child marriage for girls as young as 9 and boys as young as 15.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that 28 percent of girls in Iraq are married before age 18. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq, 22 percent of unregistered marriages involved girls under age 14. Poverty, insecurity, and lower educational outcomes for girls have all been associated with increased child marriage rates in Iraq. Child marriage and adolescent pregnancy can have serious adverse health impacts, limit access to education and employment, and exacerbate risks of sexual and domestic violence.

By November, the Iraqi parliament had not yet passed a draft child protection law introduced to parliament in June 2023. If passed, the law would be the first child protection law in the country and a vital step in safeguarding children's rights in Iraq. The law addresses crucial issues like child labor, exploitation, and abuse. It would also explicitly enshrine children's fundamental rights into law, including the rights to life, health, education, and citizenship.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

On April 27, Iraq's parliament passed an amendment to the country's existing "Law on Combatting Prostitution," No. 8 of 1988 punishing same-sex relations with a penalty of between 10 and 15 years in prison. The law also allows for a prison term between 1 and 3 years for people who undergo or perform gender-affirming medical interventions and for "imitating women." The law provides for 7 years in prison and a fine between 10 million Iraqi dinars (US$7,700) and 15 million dinars ($11,500) for "promoting homosexuality," which the law does not define. On August 8, 2023, the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission issued a directive ordering all media outlets to replace the term "homosexuality" with "sexual deviance" in their published and broadcast language and banning the use of the term "gender."

The digital targeting of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people and violence against them, including killings, abductions, torture, and sexual violence by armed groups in Iraq continued to be met with impunity. Iraqi authorities have also targeted LGBT people using a range of vague provisions in Iraq's penal code aimed at policing morals and public indecency and limiting freedom of expression.

## Death Penalty

Iraq has long had one of the highest rates of executions in the world. About 8,000 prisoners, most charged with terrorism offenses, are on death row in Iraq. Authorities in 2024 carried out the executions despite well-documented flaws in Iraq's judicial system that deny defendants' right to due process and a fair trial and rely on confessions obtained through torture. On December 25, 2023, Iraqi authorities executed thirteen men in Nasiriyah prison, the first mass execution since 21 men were executed on November 16, 2020. Multiple mass executions occurred in 2024, including the execution of 13 people on April 22. The Iraqi government does not provide public figures on executions.

Authorities undertook executions without regard for the basic rights of those facing the death penalty, including executions carried out without prior notice and not allowing prisoners to call their families or lawyers before their executions.

The Kurdistan Region has 466 people held in prison with pending death sentences, according to the KRG Directorate of Corrections. The KRG has maintained a de facto

moratorium on the death penalty since 2008, banning it "except in very few cases which were considered essential," according to a KRG spokesperson.

## Returns of Displaced People

Seven years after the last territory controlled by the Islamic State (ISIS) was retaken by forces from Iraq and a United States-led international military coalition, about 1.1 million Iraqis remain internally displaced, mostly across the KRI.

In January, the Iraqi Council of Ministers announced a July 30 deadline for the closure of the last remaining internally displaced people (IDP) camps in the Kurdistan Region. To encourage returns, the Ministry of Migration and Displacement also announced a package of aid and incentives for returnees, including a one-time payment of 4 million Iraqi dinars (about $3,000) per family, some government jobs, social security benefits, and interest-free small business loans.

According to the International Organization for Migration, 7,699 households left IDP camps between April 3 and August 29, the majority of whom returned to Ninewa and Salah al-Din governorates. In July, the last IDP camp in Sulaymaniyah governorate was officially closed.

Human Rights Watch and other rights groups raised concerns that prematurely closing the camps by the July 30 deadline would imperil the rights of IDPs. IDPs cited ongoing security concerns, lagging reconstruction, a lack of livelihood opportunities, issues of property rights, and unresolved tensions as reasons preventing their return. Some families also fear retaliation or persecution from local communities who view them as having been associated with ISIS.

On July 25, the government announced it would postpone the July 30 deadline for camp closure to the end of 2024.

## Climate Change and Environmental Degradation

Iraq is among the most vulnerable countries to global warming and faces various environmental crises, including droughts, desertification, increased frequency and severity of sandstorms, pollution, and rising temperatures. Extreme industrial pollution, enabled

by weak environmental legislation and poor enforcement, is common. In recent years there is increasing attention to the health harms experienced by communities living near sites of oil and gas production, particularly from gas flaring.

A growing environmental movement in Iraq seeks to address environmental degradation, help prepare Iraq to adapt to global warming, and promote Iraq's transition away from a fossil fuels-based economy. Their efforts, like those of activists across the civil society space, have been met with harassment, intimidation, and threats.

# Israel and Palestine

In 2024, the Israeli military continued to kill, wound, starve, and forcibly displace thousands of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, and to destroy their homes, schools, hospitals, and infrastructure at a scale unprecedented in recent history. The Gaza Ministry of Health reported in late November that more than 44,000 people had been killed and 104,000 wounded since hostilities escalated on October 7, 2023. Nearly all Palestinians in Gaza were forcibly displaced, and all faced severe food insecurity or famine.

In November, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Gaza from October 7, 2023, to May 20, 2024, when the ICC Prosecutor requested the warrants, and the leader of Hamas's military wing, Mohammed Deif, for the attacks in Israel on October 7, 2023, that included war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Prosecutor's request had also named Hamas leaders Ismail Haniyeh and Yahya Sinwar, whom Israel later killed.

In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the UN reported that Palestinians killed 6 Israeli settlers and 16 soldiers, while Israelis killed 719 Palestinians, from October 7, 2023, to October 7, 2024 – far more than in any other year since 2005, when the UN began systematically recording fatalities. The number of Palestinian dead stem from Israel's continued use of excessive lethal force, including airstrikes and drone-launched missiles.

In September, Israel escalated airstrikes in Lebanon, following attacks using booby-trapped pagers and walkie talkies distributed among Hezbollah members that killed at least 32 people and wounded more than 3,250. Israeli ground forces invaded Lebanon on October 1. From October 7, 2023, to mid-November 2024, there were 3,445 conflict-related deaths and 14,600 wounded in Lebanon, most after mid-September. Over 400,000 people fled to Syria.

Armed groups in the Gaza Strip killed 6 hostages from Israel and continued to hold 101, including over 30 people believed to have died. Since October 7, 2023, Hezbollah, Iran, the Houthis in Yemen, and Palestinian armed groups in Gaza launched 28,000 rocket, missile and drone attacks, mostly intercepted, that killed at least 29 civilians in Israel and

in Israeli-occupied territory as of mid-October. Twelve children were killed by a rocket in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights; Hezbollah denied responsibility. The attacks displaced tens of thousands of people from the Gaza Envelope and northern Israel.

The Israeli authorities continued to commit the crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution through their repression of Palestinians. In July, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an advisory opinion finding Israel's presence in the occupied Palestinian territory is unlawful, that Israel is in breach of the prohibition on racial discrimination and apartheid, that it should evacuate and dismantle all settlements and make reparation to Palestinians, including compensation and allowing Palestinians it displaced after 1967 to return to their homes, and that other governments should cease any recognition of, trade or investment in settlements and work to bring the illegal situation in the occupied territory to an end.

The EU, UK, and other countries resumed funding to UNRWA, the key humanitarian agency for Palestinians. The US continued to withhold funding to UNRWA, while it approved over 100 arms sales and provided Israel an unprecedented $17.9 billion in security assistance. Countries including the Netherlands, Canada, and the UK suspended some arms transfers or licenses to Israel due to a clear risk of their arms being used in serious violations of international law.

## Gaza Strip

The 44,000 deaths in Gaza due to the conflicted reported by the Gaza Ministry of Health did not include many people who died from illness, disease, or who were buried under the rubble. The data on deaths and injuries do not include civilian status, but 70 percent of the 8,200 fatalities the UN Human Rights office (OHCHR) had verified by September were women and children.

Israeli forces forcibly displaced nearly all of Gaza's population, often multiple times. In October 2023, Israel ordered more than 1 million people in northern Gaza to evacuate within 24 hours. By May 2024, more than half of Gaza's population was crammed into the southern city of Rafah, which the Israeli military then attacked, forcing more than 1.4 million people to flee again. Beginning in October 2024, Israel cut all aid to northern Gaza and again forcibly displaced people there. Most of Gaza's territory was under military

evacuation orders, part of a system of forcible transfer of Palestinian civilians that amounts to a crime against humanity. Al-Mawasi, the Israeli-declared "humanitarian zone," lacked adequate shelter, water, sanitation, or other infrastructure, and had a population density of 88,000 people per square mile as of August. Israeli attacks and demolitions by combat engineers and military bulldozers destroyed or damaged 63 percent of all Gaza's buildings, rendering much of the Strip uninhabitable, clearly constituting ethnic cleansing in some areas and violating Palestinians' right to return.

More than 87 percent of all schools, and all universities in Gaza were damaged or destroyed, including in attacks that were apparently unlawful. Since October 7, more than 10,000 students and 441 educational staff were killed in Gaza.

Almost 84 percent of health facilities were destroyed or damaged, including in apparently unlawful attacks. The collapse of the healthcare system deprived the estimated 50,000 pregnant women and girls in Gaza of access to adequate care, and increased the risk of serious health complications during pregnancy, birth, and post-partum. UN experts warned of a 300 percent increase in miscarriages in Gaza.

In January, March, and May, the International Court of Justice issued provisional measures as part of a case filed by South Africa that Israel violated its obligations under the 1948 Genocide Convention in Gaza. Israel flouted the court's orders Israel to open border crossings and allow humanitarian aid into Gaza at scale.

Israeli authorities deprived people in Gaza of adequate water needed for survival for months, restricting piped water and forcing water pumps, desalination, wastewater, and sewage facilities offline by cutting electricity, razing solar panels at several facilities, and blocking fuel needed to run electricity generators. Israeli forces attacked water and sanitation workers and warehouses, preventing repairs, and blocked the entry of equipment and parts. On average, from October 2023 to July 2024, people had access to less than 5 liters of water per day, one-third of the WHO's minimum standard for survival, and lack of water and sanitation contributed to a public health disaster, notwithstanding a child-vaccination campaign after the first polio case in 25 years were detected in August. Cases of diarrhea among children under 5 increased from 2,000 per month before October 7, 2023, to 71,000 as of January. Israel's denial of water to the Palestinian population of Gaza amounts to the crime against humanity of extermination and the genocidal act of

inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the destruction of the group in whole or part.le or part.

Israel's blockade denied 83 percent of food aid entry to Gaza as of September, and on average people were eating one meal every other day, while more than one million people in southern and central Gaza did not receive any food rations in August. In October, Israel ordered the population of northern Gaza to evacuate and blocked all aid to the area, while the total aid Israel allowed to enter Gaza overall fell to its lowest level since the beginning of the escalation, leading to assessments that famine was "imminent" in the north.

Israeli forces repeatedly attacked known aid-worker locations after aid workers had shared with the Israeli military their precise coordinates in advance. In September, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee stated that "the number of aid workers killed in Gaza in the past year is the highest ever in a single crisis." At least 318 aid workers were killed in Gaza from October 2023 to October 2024.

The Israeli military's forced displacements, lack of effective advance warnings of attacks, and siege of Gaza created extreme risks and suffering for children and adults with disabilities, who often could not flee for safety or access the food, medicine and assistive devices necessary for their survival. Its extensive use of explosive weapons, including in densely populated areas and attacks on residential buildings with no apparent military target, caused injuries resulting in permanent disabilities and lifelong scarring for children in Gaza. All children with disabilities faced unique psychological harm due to the violence and deprivation they have experienced or witnessed.

Israeli authorities did not allow any Palestinians to exit Gaza through the Erez Crossing, the only passenger crossing from Gaza into Israel through which Palestinians can travel to the West Bank and abroad. About 110,000 people were able to leave Gaza to Egypt from October 2023 until Israel took control of the Rafah crossing and closed it on May 6. From May to November, Israel allowed only around 320 critical patients to leave Gaza for medical care. About 12,000 people in need of medical evacuation were on waiting lists to go to Egypt as of September. Egypt, Turkey, Qatar, Jordan, Italy and several other countries accepted or offered to accept Palestinians in need of medical care; other Western countries, such as the UK, had accepted none by early November.

### *Hamas and Palestinian Armed Groups in Gaza*

In addition to holding civilian hostages, Palestinian armed groups shot to death six hostages one to two days before their bodies were found by Israeli forces in a tunnel under Rafah on August 31. The Qassam Brigades stated that fighters guarding hostages had been given "new instructions" and that Israeli military pressure would cause hostages to be returned "in shrouds."

The UN special representative on sexual violence in armed conflict reported in March that her mission had found "clear and convincing information" that some hostages held in Gaza had been subjected to sexual violence including rape.

## West Bank

Israel's repression of Palestinians in the West Bank intensified during 2024. Israeli authorities rarely prosecute those responsible for violence against Palestinians.

Israeli forces carried out several large-scale raids, particularly targeting refugee camps, where 130 Palestinians were killed, based on OCHA reports.

Israeli authorities apply Israeli civil law to settlers but govern West Bank Palestinians under military law, deny them basic due process, and try them in military courts.

The difficulty in obtaining Israeli building permits in East Jerusalem and the 60 percent of the West Bank under Israel's exclusive control (Area C) has driven Palestinians to build structures at risk of demolition for being unauthorized.

Nearly 6,200 Palestinians, including more than 2,700 children, were displaced from their homes in the West Bank since October 7, by Israeli military home-demolitions or attacks that destroyed homes, as well as by state-supported settler violence. The UN recorded more than 1,400 settler attacks as of October 2, 2024.

In September, Israel's supreme court ruled in favor of a settler organization to evict a Palestinian family from their homes in East Jerusalem, under a discriminatory law that allows settlers to claim land Jews owned in East Jerusalem before 1948. Palestinians are barred under Israeli law from making analogous land claims in Israel.

Israeli authorities provide security, infrastructure, and services to more than 700,000 settlers in the occupied West Bank, which includes East Jerusalem.

Since 2023, the Israeli government approved the construction of more than 20,000 new housing units in unlawful settlements in the occupied West Bank. As of October, 28 settlement "outposts" were established, which are not authorized but receive government and military support to take over Palestinian land.

Australia, Canada, the EU, the US and the United Kingdom imposed sanctions on violent settlers and settlement entities in the West Bank, but not Israeli officials.

Prominent Palestinian civil society organizations in the West Bank remain outlawed as "terrorist" organizations.

### *Freedom of Movement*

Israeli authorities continued to require Palestinian ID holders to hold difficult-to-obtain, time-limited permits to enter Israel and large parts of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Israeli forces harshly restricted Palestinians' travel within the West Bank, and largely prohibited Palestinians' harvesting olives in 2023 and again in 2024, causing economic losses.

Israel continued construction of the separation barrier, 85 percent of which falls within the West Bank, and which will isolate 9 percent of the West Bank when complete.

### *Abuses by the Palestinian Authority*

The PA arbitrarily detained opponents and critics, including students and journalists. Between January and November 2024, the Palestinian statutory watchdog, the Independent Commission for Human Rights, received 231 complaints against the PA of arbitrary arrests, including detention without trial or charge, 117 complaints of torture and ill-treatment during detention.

There was no change to personal status laws for Muslims and Christians that discriminate against women.

## Israel

In October, the Israeli Knesset approved legislation to ban the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) from operating and declare it a terrorist organization. The agency employed 14,000 staff in the Gaza Strip, where it was an essential provider of humanitarian aid, education and medical care.

At least six Lebanese and 137 Palestinian journalists and media workers were killed, and 69 were arrested from October 7, 2023 to November 2024. Israel forcibly closed Al Jazeera's office in Ramallah and revoked the press credentials of Al Jazeera journalists in September.

Israeli authorities systematically denied the claims of most asylum seekers, including roughly 30,000 from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan, but began offering residency to men who enlisted in the military.

### *Detention, Torture, and Ill-Treatment of Palestinians*

Israeli authorities arbitrarily detained, tortured, inflicted sexual violence on, and denied adequate food and medical care to detained Palestinian men, women, and children. National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir pushed through punitive policies including to limit detainees' food. The Health Ministry restricted access to hospitals for detainees from Gaza at the Sde Teiman facility in Israel unless they faced immediate death or severe disability "such as a limb amputation or loss of an eye." At least 53 Palestinians died in detention as of July, with Israel often withholding their bodies.

After October 7, Israeli authorities detained incommunicado and abused thousands of Palestinian workers who had been in Israel lawfully. In 2024, Israeli authorities continued to deport Palestinians arrested in Gaza to facilities inside Israel, including healthcare workers, who reported being tortured and denied food, water and medical care. Israeli news media reported amputations of detainees due to abusive use of restraints, surgeries without anesthesia, and sexual and gender-based violence. At the Sde Teiman military

base, nine soldiers were arrested but then released for raping a detainee, who had to be hospitalized.

As of June, Israeli authorities held 3,377 Palestinians in administrative detention without charge, trial or the ability to contest evidence of wrongdoing, and detained 1,415 Palestinians from Gaza under the "Unlawful Combatants" law, a form of administrative detention. Israel denied independent access to detention facilities, including to the ICRC, since October 7, 2023.

# Italy

Italy's coalition government led by a hard-right nationalist party pursued offshore processing of asylum applications, outsourced repressive migration controls by countries with problematic human rights records, and obstructed humanitarian rescues at sea. Parliament approved a law criminalizing seeking surrogacy abroad, and harmful policies and rhetoric about the reproductive rights of women and girls and about LGBT people contributed to a hostile environment. Interference with media freedom and constraints on civil society raised concerns about respect for the rule of law.

## Migrants and Asylum Seekers

Around 55,000 people, including more than 6,350 unaccompanied children, reached Italy by sea in the first ten months of 2024, less than half the number that arrived during the same period in 2023. Overall statistics showed a significant increase in use of other routes. Following a July visit to Lampedusa, an Italian island which receives many migrants by sea, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) urged greater support for migrants with vulnerabilities and called for new identification procedures in line with children's rights.

The government obstructed nongovernmental rescue organizations, detaining rescue ships at least 25 times between February 2023 and September 2024. As of October, authorities have the power to fine and detain NGO aircraft. In August 2024, UN experts reiterated concerns about Italy's "distant port policy" which obliges rescue ships to disembark in ports in central and northern Italy rather than in Sicily and about the recurring administrative detention of rescue ships. In September, prosecutors sought a 6-year sentence for Matteo Salvini for refusing as interior minister to allow migrants to disembark from an NGO rescue ship in 2019.

Seven years after authorities seized the *Iuventa* search-and-rescue ship and leveled charges of facilitating unauthorized immigration against three NGOs and a shipping company, a court in Trapani in April acquitted 21 defendants due to lack of evidence.

Calling into question Italy's efforts to outsource migration control to Libya, Italian courts ruled that captains of merchant vessels should not return people they rescue at sea to Libya due to risk of serious human rights violations. In February, the Court of Cassation, the highest criminal court, upheld the conviction of the captain of a supply ship for the return to Libya of 101 people in 2018. In June, a civil court in Rome ruled that another commercial ship captain as well as Italian authorities had wrongfully returned 150 people to Libya in July 2018 and ordered financial compensation to the victims who brought the case. Also in June, a court in Crotone concluded that the Libyan maritime rescue coordination center and the Libyan Coast Guard are not legitimate search and rescue actors.

In April, Italy agreed with Tunisia a package of financial support and credit lines worth €105 million which Prime Minister Meloni described as part of Italy's plan to deepen economic ties and curb migration. Italy also agreed to grant visas to 12,000 skilled Tunisians.

Italy's deal with Albania to offshore the processing of adult male asylum seekers intercepted or rescued at sea by Italian vessels ran into difficulty in October and November when Italian judges ruled unlawful the detention of two groups of men rescued at sea by Italy and sent to Albania. The court called into question the designation of the men's countries as "safe" countries of origin that serves as the basis for the accelerated processing of claimants in Albania. As a result, both groups of men—the first to be taken to Albania under the deal—were transferred to Italy.

By May, 216 people had been resettled out of Libya to Italy under a program agreed between UNHCR, civil society groups, and the Italian government in December 2023. Italy has committed to evacuate or resettle 1,500 people from Libya by 2026.

## Discrimination and Intolerance

Following an 8-day visit to Italy in May, the UN Independent Expert Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice and Equality in the Context of Law Enforcement expressed concerns about racial profiling by the police, disproportionate incarceration of Africans and people of African descent, and the lack of comprehensive race-based data among other issues signaling systemic racism. In October, the European Commission against Racism and

Intolerance recommended steps to counter racism within law enforcement and persistent prejudice against Roma in housing and education.

A criminal law amendment allowing the incarceration of pregnant women and those with children under one year of age was dubbed the "anti-Roma" measure after Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini repeatedly asserted that Roma women who commit crimes evade prison by remaining pregnant.

In September, the lower house of parliament voted against law reforms to grant citizenship following 10 years of schooling in Italy. Under current law, these children, including those born in Italy, can access citizenship only once they turn 18 and meet certain requirements.

## Poverty and Inequality

According to data published by the national statistical institute ISTAT in 2024, almost 10 percent of the Italian population lived in poverty in 2023, on par with the previous year. In July, the EU Court of Justice ruled that Italy's 10-year residency requirement for foreign nationals to access the "citizen's income" social security scheme, which provided income support to those with low incomes, constituted unlawful discrimination. The government had already replaced that scheme in January with a new system of "inclusion checks" and vocational training that provides more limited assistance than Italian citizens receive and requires five years' residency.

Oxfam reported data indicating that the richest 20 percent in Italy held two-thirds of the nation's wealth, while the poorest 60 percent held just 13.5 percent.

## Women's Rights

Sexual and gender-based violence remains a serious concern. Government statistics published in July showed a steady increase from 2021 to 2023 in cases of domestic violence against women, sexual assault, and other acts of gender-based violence and harassment. A law enacted in December 2023 accelerated the processing of domestic violence cases, gave police and prosecutors additional tools to counter domestic violence and stalking and increased punishments for violating protection orders.

In April, parliament passed a government-sponsored measure to facilitate access by anti-abortion groups to family counseling centers where many pregnant people go seeking advice and access to abortion. Abortion is legal in Italy within the first trimester, and later in some circumstances, but people often face significant obstacles due to high numbers of healthcare professionals who invoke conscientious objection and refuse to participate in the procedure.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Italy dropped from 34th to 36th place out of 49 European countries in ILGA Europe's assessment of policies and laws protecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. ILGA Europe pointed to hate speech by prominent politicians, attacks on same-sex parent families, and inadequate state response to violence and discrimination targeting LGBT people. In a survey by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency 60 percent of respondents in Italy said anti-LGBT violence had increased in the last five years and 68 percent said they had experienced bullying, insults, or threats at school.

In October the Senate approved a bill that criminalizes having a child via surrogacy abroad (a practice already illegal in Italy), punishable by up to two years in prison and up to a €1 million fine. The measure will have a disproportionate impact on same-sex and infertile couples' right to create a family.

## Rule of Law

In July, an alliance of media freedom organizations said lack of media independence and use of legal intimidation against journalists in Italy was "alarming." In its yearly rule of law report issued in July, the European Commission also highlighted an increase in lawsuits targeting journalists. The European Commission noted excessive government use of emergency decrees and shrinking civic space.

The lower house of parliament approved in September a security bill critics say violates freedom of expression and assembly. In addition to creating new offenses, including non-violent protest in prisons or immigration detention centers, the bill increases punishments for certain offenses committed during protests.

# Japan

Japan is a liberal democracy with a robust civil society. In October, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) Shigeru Ishiba became Japan's new prime minister. In November's general election, the LDP and its coalition partner lost their majority in the lower house of the Diet for the first time since 2009.

Japan has no laws prohibiting racial, ethnic, or religious discrimination, discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, or discrimination based on age. Japan does not have a national human rights institution.

## Death Penalty

Concerns have long been raised about death row inmates, including their inadequate access to legal counsel and that they are notified of their execution only on the day it takes place. There had been no executions in Japan in 2024 at time of writing and 107 people were on death row in penal facilities as of October. In September, a local court found Iwao Hakamata, an 88-year-old former professional boxer arrested in 1966 for the murder of a family of four and subsequently given the death penalty, not guilty after a retrial. Hakamata's retrial began in 2023 after decades of retrial request processes. Hakamata is the fifth death-row prisoner to be exonerated in Japan since World War II.

## Criminal Justice System

Japan's pretrial criminal justice system has long been criticized for its prolonged detention and interrogations without the presence of legal counsel, which often involve coerced confessions through manipulation and intimidation. Efforts for reform led to several positive court rulings. In July, the Tokyo District Court ordered the government to compensate for violating the right to personal dignity in a case in which the prosecutor verbally abused the suspect during days of relentless interrogation, even after the suspect had invoked his right to remain silent. In August, the Osaka High Court decided for the first time to prosecute a prosecutor over his conduct during an interrogation.

## Prison Conditions

Many women imprisoned in Japan suffer serious human rights abuse and mistreatment in custody due to the government's inadequate reforms, the criminalization of simple possession and use of drugs, and insufficient alternatives to imprisonment. In February, in light of Human Rights Watch research, the Japanese government acknowledged that between 2014 and 2022, prison guards violated six times a 2014 directive effectively banning all penal institutions from using restraints on imprisoned pregnant women inside delivery rooms. In March, the Ministry of Justice broadened the 2014 directive in line with international standards. in line with international standards.

## Women's Rights

Japan ranks last among the Group of Seven nations for gender equality, primarily due to inadequate empowerment and representation of women in politics and business, according to the World Economic Forum. Women's rights activists continue to push for reforms; efforts to change the current compulsory system of one common surname for married couples are gaining momentum. Under current law, some 95 percent of married couples end up using their husband's surname, partly due to social norms and socioeconomic inequalities.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

While the National Diet stalled on revising the abusive Gender Identity Disorder Special Cases Act despite a landmark Supreme Court ruling in 2023, several positive court rulings were delivered related to marriage equality. In March, the Sapporo High Court ruled that the ban on same-sex marriage was unconstitutional, followed by similar rulings in October by the Tokyo High Court and in December by the Fukuoka High Court. The three rulings by the high courts are among the six marriage equality cases currently pending in courts across Japan. In March, the Supreme Court's Third Petty Bench ruled that same-sex partners are eligible for crime victims' benefits as surviving family members, the first such ruling in Japan.

## Asylum Seekers and Refugees

Japan's asylum and refugee determination system remains strongly oriented against granting refugee status. In 2023, the Justice Ministry received 13,823 applications for refugee status, but recognized only 303 people as refugees, and categorized 1,005 people, 920 from Myanmar, as needing humanitarian assistance, allowing them to stay in Japan. Applications for refugee status in 2023 increased by 266 percent from 2022.

In June, the amended Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act went into effect. The new law allows Japan to deport asylum seekers who apply for refugee status more than twice.

## Rights of Migrant Workers

As Japan faces a rapid decline in its working age population, the government has secured migrant workers through the foreign technical intern training program for decades. The program long drew criticism for being a "hotbed" of human rights violations, partly because it binds migrant workers to their sponsoring employers without the option of changing them for at least three years.

In June, the Diet abolished the foreign technical intern training program and established a new training and employment system for foreign workers. While the new system will eventually allow migrant workers to change their employers after working for one year, critics say the conditions remain vague.

## Racial Profiling

In January, three ethnic minority residents of Japan filed a lawsuit against authorities including the Japanese government and the Tokyo metropolitan government, alleging that the three were subjected to repeated police identity checks because of how they looked.

## Right to Education for Non-Citizen Children

International law requires primary education to be compulsory for all children, and permits no discrimination based on national origin or language in the realization of the right to education. However, Japan's law on compulsory education applies only to Japanese citizen

children, not to non-citizen children living in Japan. According to the education ministry, around 8,600 non-citizen children of compulsory education age—almost 6 percent of all such children—were possibly not enrolled in school. The ministry also reported that almost 70,000 children were in need of Japanese language instruction, the largest number ever recorded.

## Disability Rights

In July, Japan's Supreme Court ruled that the now-defunct Eugenic Protection Act was unconstitutional and ordered the Japanese government to compensate people who were sterilized under the law. Approximately 84,000 persons, mostly with genetic disorders, were targeted by the law, including around 25,000 persons who were sterilized between 1948 and 1996.

# Jordan

Jordan held parliamentary elections in September 2024, with 41 out of 138 seats in the lower house of parliament elected under a new law that aims to boost political parties. Following the elections, King Abdullah II appointed a new government headed by Prime Minister Jafar Hassan, who previously served as the king's chief of staff.

Jordanian authorities continued to limit civic space in 2024, arresting and harassing peaceful dissidents and journalists and using vague and abusive laws to limit free speech and peaceful activism. In February, Access Now reported that 35 Jordanian and Jordan-based journalists, activists, and politicians had been repeatedly targeted with the Israeli NSO Group's Pegasus spyware between 2019 and 2023, including two Human Rights Watch staff members.

## Freedom of Expression

Jordanian law criminalizes speech deemed critical of the king, foreign countries, government officials and institutions, Islam, Christianity, and "defamatory" speech.

In August 2023, Jordan's parliament hastily amended the cybercrimes law, bypassing public debate or input. The changes increased penalties for online defamation or "character assassination" to at least three months in jail and/or fines between 5,000 and 20,000 Jordanian dinars (US$7,000-$28,000). Following public criticism and recommendations from the UN Human Rights Council, Jordan agreed in 2024 to review the amendments.

In 2023, cases relating to online defamation under the older 2015 cybercrimes law reached 3,330, according to an annual report by the National Center for Human Rights (NCHR).

In June, a Jordanian court sentenced Hiba Abu Taha to one year in prison for an article in which she criticized alleged shipping of goods to Israel via Jordan. In July, authorities jailed journalist and commentator Ahmed Hassan al-Zoubi to serve a one-year prison term for a December 2022 Facebook post in which he criticized authorities' response to protests over fuel prices.

In late 2023 and early 2024, Jordanian authorities arrested and harassed scores of Jordanians who participated in pro-Palestine protests across the country or engaged in online advocacy. Human Rights Watch documented cases in which authorities brought charges against four activists under the new cybercrimes law, including Anas al-Jamal, a prominent activist, and Ayman Sandouka, secretary of a now-dissolved political party.

## Freedoms of Assembly and Association

While Jordan's 2011 Public Gatherings Law does not require government permission for public meetings or demonstrations, authorities still required organizations and venues to seek approval from the Interior Ministry or General Intelligence Department.

Laws like the 1996 Labor Law and the 2008 Associations Law restrict the formation of trade unions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Authorities also impose onerous requirements for NGOs to receive foreign funding. In December 2023, a new process centralized foreign funding requests under the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, removing the automatic approval after 30 days of no response.

## Refugees and Migrants

In May, after facing public pressure, Jordanian authorities cancelled the administrative deportation orders for two Syrian refugees who were at high risk of persecution if returned to Syria and released them from detention.

By late 2024, over 624,000 people from Syria had sought refuge in Jordan, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Over 80 percent of Syrians lived outside refugee camps, mostly in rented accommodation.

In 2024, UNHCR reported that Jordan also hosted asylum seekers and refugees from other countries, including Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia. Authorities upheld a 2019 ban preventing UNHCR from registering non-Syrians who entered for medical treatment, study, tourism, or work, as asylum seekers, leaving many without UNHCR documentation or access to services.

By June 2024, UNHCR reported that labor authorities had issued 27,653 work permits for Syrians in 2024, with 458,135 in total since 2016, though many were renewals. Most professions remained closed to non-Jordanians, forcing many Syrians into the informal sector without labor protections.

Jordan hosted an estimated 49,000 documented migrant domestic workers in 2024, mostly women from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. NGOs repeatedly referred domestic workers to Labor Ministry investigators to report abuses, including wage theft, unsafe working conditions, excessive hours, passport confiscation, and physical, verbal, and sexual abuse.

## Women's Rights

Jordan's 2019 personal status code discriminates against women. Women up to 30 years old need male guardian permission to marry for the first time, and marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men are not recognized. Further, a woman who disobeys her husband loses her entitlement to spousal maintenance (*nafaqa*), for example, if she leaves the marital home "without a legitimate reason." And women cannot travel abroad with their children without male guardian approval.

Authorities have arrested and administratively detained women because their male guardian complained they sought to leave the family home without permission. Human Rights Watch documented cases where women remained confined in detention for more than 10 years.

Jordanian women married to non-Jordanians cannot legally pass on their nationality to their children.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

While Jordan does not explicitly criminalize same-sex relations, vague "immorality" provisions in the penal code are used to target sexual and gender minorities, and there are no protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

In December 2023, Human Rights Watch reported that Jordanian authorities systematically targeted lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights activists, subjecting them to interrogations, threats, and intimidation, leading many to shut down their organizations, stop their work, or flee the country. Government officials also smeared LGBT rights activists online, and social media users posted photos of them with messages inciting violence against them.

## Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights

Jordan continued to grapple with high unemployment, particularly for young adults and women, coupled with rising poverty after the Covid-19 pandemic and an increase in the cost of living. A decade of International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan programs failed to reduce government debt and led to price hikes, including for fuel and electricity, without adequate compensatory measures. Human Rights Watch reported in 2023 that Jordan's automated cash transfer program for workers on low incomes, funded by the World Bank, was undermined by errors, discriminatory policies, and stereotypes about poverty, leaving many without social security as they struggled to afford food, rent, and debt.

Jordan remains one of the few countries in the world that still allows imprisoning people for unpaid household debt, despite international law prohibiting it. In 2023, authorities lifted the pandemic-related moratorium on imprisoning debtors owing over 5,000 Jordanian dinars (about US$7,000). Human Rights Watch documented how, in the absence of an adequate social security system, tens of thousands of Jordanians took out loans to pay for everyday expenses, only to face imprisonment when unable to repay.

## Criminal Justice System

Local governors continued to use provisions of the Crime Prevention Law of 1954 to place individuals in administrative detention for up to one year, in circumvention of the Criminal Procedure Law. Jordan's NCHR reported in 2024 that only 37,395 people were administratively detained in 2023, marking an increase from the 34,411 administrative detentions in 2022.

## Cross-Border Operations

In January, Jordan launched airstrikes in southeast Syria that killed 10 people, including women, men, and children, raising concerns of extrajudicial executions. Human Rights Watch urged authorities to ensure accountability and compensation for the civilian harm caused.

# Kazakhstan

Authorities in Kazakhstan routinely violate the rights to peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, and freedom of association, and misuse overbroad criminal charges in counter-extremism legislation to target government critics and others. There continued to be minimal accountability for law enforcement officials for rights violations perpetrated during and immediately after deadly 2022 anti-government protests. In April, Kazakhstan reintroduced criminal sanctions for light bodily harm and battery, the charges most commonly used in domestic abuse cases, but more reforms are needed to effectively tackle widespread domestic violence across Kazakhstan.

## Accountability and Justice

A handful of law enforcement officials were prosecuted in 2024 for torture and ill-treatment of detainees who were arrested immediately after the January 2022 anti-government protests, but Kazakh authorities have still not launched a comprehensive and effective investigation into the serious loss of life and other grave human rights violations during and after the protests. In August, an Astana court sentenced former Interior Minister Yerlan Turgumbayev to a five-year suspended sentence for abuse of power in connection with the protests.

## Government Opponents and Other Critics

Kazakh authorities ramped up efforts to stifle political opposition activism. Following the conviction in November 2023 of opposition leader Marat Zhylanbaev, who was sentenced to seven years in prison on charges of "financing extremist activities" and "participating in the activities of a banned extremist organization," authorities imprisoned two other government critics on the same charges. On August 2 and 16, 2024, Kazakh courts sentenced Duman Mukhammedkarim, an independent journalist and activist, and Asylbek Zhamuratov, another civic activist, to seven years in prison each and banned Mukhammedkarim from engaging in public activities for three years and Zhamuratov from engaging in political activities for five.

On September 9, Kazakhstan's Supreme Court declined to consider an appeal by Zhanbolat Mamay, an opposition activist and head of the unregistered Democratic Party of

Kazakhstan, who was sentenced to a six-year restricted freedom sentence in April 2023 for allegedly organizing mass riots in Almaty in January 2022 and banned from engaging in political or journalistic activities.

People in Kazakhstan convicted on overbroad "extremism" and "terrorism" charges—even those who have not participated in, instigated, or financed violence—are automatically subject to wide-ranging financial restrictions that interfere with their economic and social rights, including the rights to an adequate standard of living and access to work and social security.

The Justice Ministry has denied registration to "Alga, Kazakhstan," an opposition group, no less than 24 times, most recently in April 2024. In late November, the group applied for registration for the 25th time.

## Freedom of Expression

In June, Kazakhstan adopted a new mass media law that threatens freedom of speech and the right to information. The law extends the definition of mass media to online publications, requiring that they be registered and have a physical presence in Kazakhstan, and grants the government expansive power to deny accreditation to foreign media representatives if their materials contain unspecified "propaganda of extremism."

Journalists faced harassment, threats, and prosecution for doing their work. On May 13, an Almaty administrative court found Jamilya Maricheva, founder of the independent news agency ProTenge, guilty of "spreading false information" and fined her for a post on ProTenge Telegram expressing concern about the denial of accreditation to Radio Azattyk colleagues. On October 18, an Astana court sentenced the investigative journalist Daniyar Adilbekov to four-and-a-half years in prison on criminal charges of "knowingly false denunciation" and "disseminating knowingly false information" for Telegram posts, including two alleging corruption risks in the oil industry and Energy Ministry.

On July 26, an Astana court sentenced Alexandr Merkul, a stand-up comedian, to 10-days detention on charges of "petty hooliganism," allegedly for using obscene language during a performance in June. In May, an Almaty court sentenced another stand-up comedian, Nuraskhan Baskozhayev, to 15 days detention for swearing in public.

During massive flooding in April, local authorities in Kazakhstan's western regions blocked journalists from accessing affected areas and prosecuted at least one journalist, Raul Uporov, on "petty hooliganism" charges after he criticized local authorities.

On June 18, a citizen of Kazakhstan fatally shot Aidos Sadykov, an independent Kazakh journalist and outspoken government critic living in exile in Ukraine. Sadykov died on July 2. As of this writing, no one had been prosecuted for his murder.

## Violence Against Women

In April, Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev signed a new law strengthening protections for women and children, but the law fell short of criminalizing domestic violence as a standalone offense. The passage of the law coincided with the high-profile trial of Kuandyk Bishimbayev, Kazakhstan's former economy minister, who on May 13 was found guilty of the murder of his wife, Saltanat Nukenova. An Astana court sentenced him to 24 years in prison. As of this writing, the Justice Ministry has five times denied registration to a new fund to combat domestic violence that was founded by Nukenova's brother to honor his sister's memory.

In March, Almaty city authorities denied activists permission to hold an International Women's Day march for the third year in a row.

In late December 2023, Kazakhstan's Internal Ministry reported they were seeking the arrest of Dinara Smailova, an outspoken women's rights advocate, on dubious criminal charges including fraud, violations of privacy, and knowingly disseminating false information. If convicted, Smailova, who previously fled Kazakhstan and lives in exile, faces up to 10 years in prison.

## Disability Rights

Children with disabilities face isolation, violence, neglect, physical restraint, and over-medication in segregated special schools or residential institutions. An obligatory medical exam and other barriers continue to obstruct children's access to inclusive education. In March, the UN disability rights committee "recommended that Kazakhstan end all forms of institutionalization" and replace the medical exam "with an individualized assessment

based on the human rights model of disability" to ensure full inclusion of students with disabilities in schools.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Kazakhstan does not provide legal protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. In February, the government blocked a website providing youth-targeted information about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues, citing national traditions and the need to "protect children."

In June, Kazakhstan's Culture and Information Ministry said it was reviewing a petition against "Open and Hidden LGBT Propaganda in Kazakhstan." Several UN experts urged the government to reject the petition as it would violate freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The ministry formed a working group to discuss the petition and on August 1, decided to partially satisfy the petition's demands by considering "restrictions on the distribution of sexualized content among children."

## Asylum Seekers and Refugees

On February 15, Almaty police arrested Karakalpak activist Akylbek Muratbai after unfounded criminal charges were brought against him in Uzbekistan. In September, Kazakh authorities rejected his claim for asylum. He remains in custody facing extradition to Uzbekistan. In March and April, Kazakh police arrested two other Karakalpak activists wanted by Uzbekistan—Rasul Zhumaniyazov and Rinat Utambekov. They too are in detention facing extradition to Uzbekistan.

## Labor Rights

Freedom of association for trade unions and the right to strike are restricted in law and in practice. On April 17, five trade union activists from western Kazakhstan held a press conference highlighting pressure independent trade unions there face, from employers and authorities, and the challenges they have encountered trying to register and engage with their employers as union representatives.

Authorities continued to ignore a May 2021 UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention decision calling for the immediate release of Erzhan Elshibaev, an imprisoned labor activist.

## Poverty and Inequality

The National Statistics Bureau reported a drop in the poverty rate in the first part of 2024 and a decrease in the overall number of households with incomes below the subsistence minimum (poverty level), but economic analysts in Kazakhstan say government figures "do not capture the real scale of poverty" in the country. Rigid eligibility criteria and means tests for Kazakhstan's main social assistance program, Targeted Social Assistance, have excluded many people who need support. Low-income families continue to face stigma and discrimination when trying to access benefits.

# Kenya

Kenya's human rights trajectory deteriorated over the past year. The authorities restricted the right to peaceful protest in heavy handed crackdowns against nationwide protests over the high cost of living.

The authorities failed to address the socio-economic causes of protests and, instead, harassed, intimidated, and arrested protest leaders, activists and civil society groups accused of supporting the protests. President William Ruto publicly threatened the courts for making decisions unfavorable to his administration. The authorities have rarely investigated or prosecuted law enforcement officers implicated in human rights abuses.

Men, women, and children with real or perceived psychosocial disabilities continue to be shackled—chained or locked in small, confined spaces—due to inadequate support and mental health services, and prevalent stigma. The International Criminal Court (ICC) deputy prosecutor announced in November 2023 that she would not pursue additional investigations in the country related to the post-election violence in 2007-2008; ICC arrest warrants remain pending against two Kenyan individuals accused of witness tampering.

## Police Brutality Against Protesters

From June 18, Kenya faced intense street protests that continued through August, over taxes proposed in the Finance Bill 2024 to meet International Monetary Fund (IMF) revenue targets that would disproportionately fall on people with low incomes. The protests organized largely by Kenyans between the ages of 18 and 35 reached their peak with the invasion of parliament on June 25. Protesters opposed taxes on goods and services such as bread, menstrual products, and mobile money transfers used by many informal workers. Protest anger evolved to include government waste and corruption and the worsening neglect of public services.

Police shot directly into crowds, killing protesters and bystanders. The authorities have continued to track down people believed to be protest leaders or one of the estimated 3,000 protesters involved in the parliament invasion. Several of these people have either been arrested or abducted by suspected security agents then forcefully disappeared. On

June 31, a preliminary report of the state funded Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) said that police had killed at least 60 protesters and abducted another 66 people.

Bodies of people showing signs of torture continued to turn up in rivers, forests, abandoned quarries, and mortuaries. The authorities have yet to investigate or prosecute anyone for these crimes. Kenya has a history of police brutality and lack of accountability for serious abuses by security forces. Requests by several of the United Nations special rapporteurs, including the rapporteur on the right to freedom of assembly and association and the rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, to visit to investigate abuses have been pending approval from Kenyan authorities for years.

## Human Rights Concerns in Kenya's Tax Proposals

As in 2024, Kenya also experienced protests in 2023 in response to tax proposals in the Finance Bill 2023. President Ruto signed the 2023 bill into law despite a parliamentary report showing more than 90 percent of Kenyans opposed it, and was similarly set to sign the 2024 bill despite strong opposition.

The tax bills come in the context of an IMF program that initiated economic measures which increased the cost of living and undermined human rights. Neither the government nor the IMF published impact assessments to ensure that the policies they are pursuing are best for the fulfilment of people's economic, social, and cultural rights. Kenya's spending on health, education, and other services essential for rights continued a downward trend and remains far below international standards under an IMF program.

## Disobedience of Court Orders and Threats to Judges

Senior Kenya government officials, including the president, publicly threatened people who filed court petitions to challenge the 2023 Finance Bill and 2023 Housing Levy. President Ruto accused the petitioners, and what he described as corrupt courts that listen and give them favorable decisions, of sabotaging his government. The president's close allies threatened to deal with judges they accused of colluding with petitioners to sabotage the president's development agenda.

The president initially ignored court orders halting his government's decision to deploy Kenyan police to Haiti without following due process. He later publicly declared that "the courts will not stop me," and approved the deployment of police to Haiti without addressing all the concerns raised by the courts.

In August 2024, police ignored a Habeas Corpus application by the families of three abducted activists—Jamil Longton, Aslam Longton, and Bob Njagi—in which the court found then Inspector General of Police, Gilbert Masengeli, in contempt of court. The authorities responded by withdrawing the judge's security details.

## Threats Against Civil Society, Media

In response to the tax protests, the authorities threatened civil society groups and some donor organizations for allegedly supporting the protests financially. President Ruto publicly accused the Ford Foundation both of funding the protests and funding civil society organizations (CSOs) such as Kenya Human Rights Commission and Katiba Institute, whom he accused of organizing the protests. In July, chairman of the Public Benefit Organizations Regulatory Authority, Mwambu Mabonga, said the authority had asked the Directorate of Criminal Investigations to investigate at least 16 CSOs for allegedly operating illegally and for receiving money from the Ford Foundation to fund the protests.

In July, some media outlets reported that the authorities summoned their editors and threatened them over live coverage of the protests. Kenyan media subsequently stopped the live coverage of the protests. President Ruto said he had the power to shut down media over the live coverage of protests but he opted not to do so.

## Kenya Deploys Police to Haiti

A long-awaited United Nations-authorized Multinational Security Support mission (MSS) led by Kenya, finally deployed to Haiti in June. The mission's mandate, renewed in September, was to support the Haitian National Police in restoring basic security and state control, and strong policies in place to monitor the force's conduct, ensure respect for human rights, and avoid the failures and abuses associated with past international interventions in Haiti.

The MSS, originally authorized in October 2023, faced legal and funding hurdles including slow commitments to a trust fund to fund its operations and a High Court decision which found the order to deploy police officers to Haiti unconstitutional. A June status of forces agreement between Kenya and Haiti partially addressed the court's objections.

## Violence Against Women and Girls

Violence against women and girls, including high femicide rates, remain prevalent in Kenya. Approximately 13 women and girls are murdered each week and 130 cases of sexual violence are reported each week. Fifteen percent of women and girls have been subjected to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and 13 percent of girls are married by the age of 18. Eighty three percent of women and girls are subjected to at least one form of obstetric violence during pregnancy, childbirth, and the post-partum period.

Between July and August 2024, parts of bodies, many of which belonged to women, were found in a dumpsite in Nairobi. Authorities stopped retrieval efforts after 17 bodies were retrieved despite additional bodies remaining in the dumpsite. Only one victim was identified, and no one has been charged with the murder. In April, Catholic priest Dominic Nzioka, was found guilty of inappropriately touching a 16-year-old girl in his congregation. Nzioka was sentenced to seven years for indecent assault of a child, but, on appeal, the High Court of Mombasa sentenced him to three years' probation and monthly summons under Kenya's Sexual Offences Act.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Kenya still criminalizes consensual same-sex relations. Article 162 of the penal code punishes "carnal knowledge against the order of nature" with up to 14 years in prison, while article 165 makes "indecent practices between males" liable to up to five years in prison.

# Kyrgyzstan

In 2024, the Kyrgyz government took steps to intimidate and silence journalists, media outlets, and government critics. The Supreme Court mandated closure of the country's leading investigative media outlet and sentenced two journalists to prison terms and two to probation for their reporting. A Russian style "foreign representatives" law came into force in April, requiring NGOs receiving foreign funding to register under strict government oversight.

Gender-based violence remains a critical issue, with domestic violence reported to be on the rise. Freedom of belief came under threat with proposed amendments to regulate religious buildings, education, and practices. These developments collectively paint a picture of a country grappling with significant human rights challenges across multiple sectors of society.

## Media Freedom

Authorities continued to crack down on independent journalists and investigative media outlets through politically motivated detentions and criminal prosecutions.

In September, the Kyrgyz Supreme Court upheld a February order for liquidation of award-winning Kloop Media, alleging it failed to register as a media outlet and made "public calls for the violent seizure of power."

In October, four of 11 current and former journalists associated with Temirov Live, an investigative outlet that exposes high-level corruption in government, were found guilty of calling for "disobedience" and riots, which, at time of writing, they have appealed. Two were sentenced to six and five years in prison, and two to probation. They were arrested in January 2024 following raids on their homes and confiscation of equipment in their office.

## Repression of Civil Society

In April president Sadyr Japarov signed an abusive "foreign representatives" law that requires any nongovernmental organization receiving any amount of foreign funding engaging in vaguely defined "political activity" to join a registry of entities working in the

interests of “foreign representatives.” Those that do not comply face suspension of activities, including banking operations, for up to six months. The law also grants the government significantly enhanced oversight powers, including to participate in the internal and external activities of registered organizations and to check their expenditures for consistency with the organization’s founding purpose. To date, only three nongovernmental organizations have registered, with some choosing to self-liquidate and others re-registering as commercial organizations.

The UN high commissioner for human rights expressed serious concern that the new law poses a ‘’serious threat to the work of numerous civil society organizations in the country, and, more broadly, violate[s] fundamental rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and the right to take part in public affairs.’.

Another draft law regulating activities of all nongovernmental organizations initiated by the presidential administration in 2022 was still with a parliamentary working group at time of writing. The bill features highly restrictive provisions on registration and operations, further expanding government oversight of NGOs.

## Freedom of Expression

Kyrgyz parliament is considering a draft mass media law, previous versions of which were criticized for seeking to significantly restrict the ability of media organizations to operate independently. In July a working group consisting of members of the parliament, media experts, and lawyers presented a sixth iteration of the bill, which removed some problematic proposals from the draft law, such as a requirement that all news outlets and regular websites register as media outlets. The latest version also ensures that media outlets can be closed only by court order.

The Kyrgyz parliament is also considering a draft law that would create a new defamation offence; the proposed offence empowers the Ministry of Culture to impose fines of up to 200,000 Kyrgyz soms (US$2,000) for dissemination of “false or erroneous information” that harms the reputation of an individual via mass media, the internet, or social media. The ministry would have power to determine who should be fined, without needing judicial approval.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights recently expressed concern about the state of freedom of expression in Kyrgyzstan, including over prison sentences for Kyrgyz journalists for allegedly "calling for mass disorder," describing the prosecutions as '"marred by due process and fair trial concerns."

## Access to Justice

In June, more than 20 journalists, activists, human rights defenders, and opposition activists in the so-called Kempir-Abad case were acquitted by a district court, after a lengthy trial. The case is named after the dam at the center of a controversial demarcation deal with Uzbekistan. The defendants had faced charges of preparing to incite riots, punishable by up to 10 years in prison. The public prosecutor's office appealed the verdict, and a new trial was ongoing at time of writing.

## Gender-Based Violence

Throughout 2024, Kyrgyzstan witnessed numerous fatal cases of gender-based and domestic violence against women. In February, the body of 37-year-old Kenjegul Toktogulova was discovered in a landfill, with forensic evidence confirming she was murdered; her partner was arrested as a suspect. Another victim, 39-year-old Aijan Alykulova, was brutally killed in her Bishkek apartment in February, allegedly by her 34-year-old partner. Rahima Aikymbaeva, 34 years old, was stabbed 27 times by her husband in April. Aikyz Kalmurza kyzy, a 23-year-old woman who was deaf, was killed in January by her husband with their daughter present.

In August president Sadyr Japarov signed a new law amending several legislative acts to enhance protection against family, sexual, and gender-based violence. The amendments eliminate the possibility of reconciliation in cases of rape and sexual assault, increase penalties for battery, and remove eligibility for probation where a person has been convicted of sexual acts with children under 16, bride kidnapping, and forced marriage.

The government opened a "one window" support center in Bishkek that provides medical, psychological, and legal help to victims and survivors of domestic and gender-based violence in a single location.

## Disability Rights

In September, the Kyrgyz parliament initiated legal amendments that would strengthen protections for persons with disabilities against sexual crimes. The proposed provisions include harsher penalties for offenses against the sexual inviolability and sexual freedom of persons with disabilities, eliminate the possibility of exemptions from imprisonment for those who commit sexual crimes against persons with disabilities, and extend protective measures to persons with disabilities regardless of their gender and age. Human Rights Watch, in December 2023, published a report documenting abuse, including rape, beatings, neglect, and humiliation of women and girls with disabilities, often perpetrated by those closest to them.

## Freedom of Belief

In August, the Kyrgyz government proposed amendments to the law on freedom of religion that would prohibit construction of religious buildings on private property and create a state registry for religious entities and buildings, increasing state capacity to surveil and control religious groups. The law would require state approval for religious study abroad and mandate that religious education domestically be provided only by individuals with state-approved certification. The bill also aims to regulate the appearance and behavior of religious followers that may cause "ambivalence" among citizens.

In September, the Interior Ministry proposed amendments to the Criminal Code that would toughen sanctions for existing extremism-related offenses, including increasing prison terms for production and distribution of extremist materials as well as for calls for violent seizure of power, while eliminating the option of fines for the latter. The bill also seeks to reintroduce the crime of possession of extremist materials, which had been previously decriminalized due to its frequent misuse against non-violent individuals. This new offense would be punishable by up to 3 years in prison, even without intent to disseminate the materials. A new offense of public calls for extremist activity using the internet or mass media is also proposed, carrying a 3-5-year prison sentence.

## Conflict at the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border

By September, 94 percent of the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had been delineated, although the remaining 6 percent was reported to include the most difficult

sections located around the Vorukh enclave and villages of Ak-Sai and Kok-Tash. The armed conflict of September 2022 that left 37 people dead, including 5 children, was concentrated in these exact locations. Both countries committed apparent war crimes in the 2022 conflict, leading to the deaths of civilians and the destruction of civilian property, including schools, according to a report by Human Rights Watch published in 2023.

# Lebanon

Cross border hostilities between Israel and Lebanese and Palestinian armed groups, including Hezbollah, significantly escalated in 2024. Between October 2023 and the November 27, 2024, ceasefire, Israeli strikes killed more than 3,961 people in Lebanon, including 736 women, 222 health and rescue workers, and 248 children, according to Lebanon's Health Ministry.

Human Rights Watch has documented violations of the laws of war and war crimes by the Israeli military, including apparently deliberate or indiscriminate attacks on journalists, civilians, medics, financial institutions, and peacekeepers, in addition to the widespread and unlawful use of white phosphorus in populated areas, among other violations. More than 1.2 million people were displaced by the time of the November ceasefire, thousands of buildings and houses were destroyed, and entire border villages were reduced to rubble.

During the hostilities, Hezbollah fired thousands of munitions into northern Israel and the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, killing at least 30 civilians. A July 27 attack on the town of Majdal Shams in the occupied Golan Heights, which Israel blamed on Hezbollah, killed 12 children. Hezbollah has denied responsibility.

At least 562,000 people crossed the border from Lebanon into Syria after the escalation of hostiles in September 2024, including at least 354,000 Syrians.

## Conduct of Hostilities

In March, the Israeli military unlawfully struck an emergency and relief center in south Lebanon, using a US-made Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) guidance kit and an Israeli-made 500-pound (about 230 kilograms) general purpose bomb, killing seven emergency and relief volunteers.

Israel's widespread and continued use of white phosphorus contributed to civilian displacement and caused grave civilian harm. Human Rights Watch found that white phosphorus munitions were used in at least 17 municipalities, including unlawfully over

populated residential areas in five of them. Israel has also used US weapons in an unlawful attack that killed aid workers in south Lebanon.

On September 16 and 17, the hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel significantly escalated after thousands of pagers and walkie-talkies—used by employees of various Hezbollah units and institutions—detonated, killing 37 people, including children and medical workers, and injuring more than 2,800 people, in an indiscriminate attack that violated the prohibition on the use of booby traps under customary international humanitarian law. US and former Israeli officials speaking to the media said that Israel was responsible for the attack, but the Israeli military has not commented.

On September 23, at least 558 people, including 50 children, were killed and over 1,835 were injured in Israeli strikes across the country that day. Israel conducted several strikes on the southern suburbs of Beirut, which, between September and October 2024, killed top Hezbollah commanders, including Hezbollah's secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah's executive council Hashem Saffieddine, the head of Hezbollah's central council Nabil Qaouk, and senior military commanders Ibrahim Akil, Ahmad Wehbe and Ali Karaki, among others.

Israeli airstrikes on the main border crossing between Lebanon and Syria on October 4 impeded civilians trying to flee and disrupted humanitarian operations. The Israeli military repeatedly attacked medical workers and healthcare facilities in Lebanon. Human Rights Watch documented three attacks, involving apparent war crimes, in which Israeli forces unlawfully struck medical personnel, transports, and facilities, including paramedics at a civil defense center in central Beirut on October 3, 2024, and an ambulance and a hospital in southern Lebanon on October 4, killing 14 paramedics.

The Israeli military also carried out repeated attacks harming United Nations peacekeeping operations in southwestern Lebanon in apparent violation of the laws of war and deliberate attacks on financial institutions affiliated to Hezbollah, which amount to war crimes.

Human Rights Watch also verified the use of an air-dropped bomb equipped with a US-produced JDAM guidance kit in an unlawful Israeli strike that killed three journalists in the southern Lebanese town of Hasbaya, and was most likely a deliberate attack on civilians and an apparent war crime.

According to the Lebanese government, more than 1.2 million people were displaced because of the hostilities between October 2023 and the November 27, 2024 ceasefire. At least 100,000 thousand houses were partially or fully destroyed, according to a study by the World Bank.

## Accountability and Justice

In May 2024, the Lebanese government announced a decision to give the International Criminal Court (ICC) jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute serious crimes committed on Lebanese territory since October 7, 2023, but the government reversed the decision just over a month later.

In November, more than 20 human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, called on Lebanon and other United Nations member states to convene a special session at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) to establish an international investigation into all human rights violations committed by all parties involved in the conflict in Lebanon.

August 2024 marked four years since the Beirut port explosion that killed at least 220 people, wounded over 7,000, and caused extensive property damage. The Lebanese authorities have yet to hold anyone accountable.

On January 17, 2024, Lebanese Attorney General at the court of cassation Judge Sabbouh Sleiman suspended an arrest warrant for former public works minister Youssef Fenianos, which was previously issued by Judge Tarek Bitar in September 2021. The suspension of the warrant came months after the cassation court's suspension of an arrest warrant for another suspect, former Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil.

Families of the victims and local and international rights groups continued to call for an international, independent, and impartial investigation into the blast by the UN HRC.

On December 10, two days after the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria was overthrown, Lebanon's Interior Minister Bassam al-Mawlawi said that nine Lebanese individuals previously detained in Syrian prisons had returned to Lebanon.

The families of the estimated 17,000 who were kidnapped or “disappeared” during and after Lebanon's deadly 1975-1990 civil war continue to wait for information on the fate of their loved ones.

## Refugees

In 2024, Lebanese authorities arbitrarily detained, tortured, and forcibly returned Syrians to Syria, including opposition activists and a Syrian army defector. The Lebanese army and Cypriot authorities worked together to prevent refugees from reaching Europe.

Syrians escaping Lebanon to Syria, particularly men, faced arbitrary detention and abuse by Syrian authorities. No Syrians should be forced back until conditions that guarantee voluntary, safe, and dignified returns in line with international standards, are in place. Human Rights Watch has documented arbitrary detentions, torture, and killings of returning refugees since 2017. At least two Syrian men deported from Lebanon and Türkiye to Syria since 2023 died in Syrian government detention in suspicious circumstances in 2024, while two others arrested in Lebanon were forcibly disappeared.

Lebanon’s General Directorate of General Security reported detaining or returning 821 Syrians attempting to leave Lebanon on 15 boats between January 2022 and August 2024.

In May 2024, the EU Commission announced a one billion euros (approximately US$1.048 billion) financial assistance package for Lebanon, with some of the funds allocated to the Lebanese army for “border and migration management.” According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Lebanese authorities deported at least 1,763 Syrians between January and June 2024.

According to the UN, there were nearly 520,000 Palestinian refugees, including over 31,000 from Syria, living in Lebanon, where they continued to face restrictions, including on their right to work and own property.

Following the killing of a local political party official in April, which the Lebanese army alleged was carried out by a group of Syrian nationals, Lebanese ministers and political officials reiterated calls for the return of Syrians in Lebanon. Following the incident, Syrians in Lebanon were reportedly beaten and faced demands across Lebanon to leave

their homes, with governorates and municipalities imposing discriminatory curfews, unlawfully restricting Syrians' right to freedom of movement.

## Economic Crisis and Rights

In 2024, the Israeli military's airstrikes across the country and their humanitarian impacts have massively exacerbated the preexisting economic crisis.

Most people in Lebanon were unable to secure their economic, social, and cultural rights amid the ongoing economic crisis and during the hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel, with low-income households bearing the brunt of the crisis. World Bank data revealed that even before the hostilities started, over 70 percent of the population was experiencing multidimensional poverty.

The cost of damages and economic losses from the war is estimated to be at US$8.5 billion, with around 166,000 people having lost their jobs because of the war, and agricultural losses and damages estimated to be at around $1.2 billion, according to the World Bank.

Lebanon's social security system has vast coverage gaps and only about 20 percent of the population have access to any form of social security. Existing social assistance programs, funded in part by the World Bank, very narrowly targeted households in extreme poverty, leaving large segments of the population vulnerable to hunger, unable to obtain medicines, and subject to other deprivations that undermine their rights.

Lebanese authorities have failed to provide reliable and sustainable access to electricity following decades of mismanaging the sector, which culminated with a nationwide black out in August 2024 after the state-run electricity company, Electricité du Liban (EDL) ran out of fuel. The outage left residents and key state institutions without state-provided electricity for more than 24 hours.

In September, Lebanon's Public Prosecutor Jamal Hajjar ordered the arrest of former central bank governor Riad Salameh for alleged financial crimes, including embezzlement of public funds.

## Freedom of Expression

Lebanese journalists, activists, and artists continued to face increasing restrictions by Lebanese authorities and other political groups. In May, Lebanon's highest Sunni and Shiite religious authorities filed lawsuits against comedian Shaden Fakih, accusing her of blasphemy and inciting sectarian strife in response to a joke at a stand-up comedy show.

In January 2024, journalist Riad Tawk was summoned to the Central Criminal Investigation Department following a defamation claim brought against him by Judge Sabouh Sleiman, Lebanon's Attorney General. Tawk had criticized Sleiman's decision to suspend the arrest warrant issued against former public works minister, Youssef Fenianos, in the Beirut blast case. According to Amnesty International, Lebanese officials, including Caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati and former Interior Minister Nouhad Machnouk, filed several defamation lawsuits in 2024 against anti-corruption watchdogs.

Several individuals, including journalists, who publicly criticized Hezbollah, including on social media, were reportedly subjected to physical assault by supporters of the group.

## Women's Rights

As of November 28, 736 women had been killed in Israeli strikes across Lebanon since October 2023. UN Women warned of growing gender inequality, as women and women-headed households in Lebanon, prior to the conflict, "were already more food insecure, struggled to meet basic needs and draw their livelihoods from participation in the labor market," in comparison to households headed by men.

Various religion-based personal status laws are discriminatory against women and allow religious courts to control matters related to marriage, divorce, and child custody. Lebanon's nationality law bars Lebanese women, but not men, from passing citizenship to their children and foreign spouses.

In April 2024, several independent members of parliament submitted a draft law which would increase protections for women facing abuse.

According to the local digital rights NGO SMEX, 80 percent of individuals in Lebanon subjected to digital threats and harassment between 2020 and 2023 were women.

## Migrant Workers

The legal status of thousands of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, including workers from Ethiopia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, is regulated by a restrictive and abusive regime of laws, regulations, and customary practices known as the *kafala* (sponsorship) system.

After the escalation of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah, many migrant workers were reportedly abandoned by their employers and denied access to shelters across the country. Recruitment agencies have been accused of subjecting workers to abuse, labor violations, and human trafficking.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people continue to face systemic discrimination in Lebanon. Article 534 of the penal code punishes "any sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature" with up to one year in prison, despite a series of court rulings between 2007 and 2018 that consensual same-sex relations are not illegal.

# Libya

Deep divisions persisted between Libyan parties while a fragile economic situation confounded efforts to reach a political settlement.

Two rival authorities in the eastern and western parts of the country vied for legitimacy and control, as affiliated armed groups and militias operated with impunity, increasing repression against civic groups and cracking down on free speech.

Survivors of major flooding in eastern Libya that claimed thousands of lives in 2023 faced a slow recovery, with hurdles getting equitable compensation, reconstruction support, and access to essential goods and services, including housing, health care, electricity, and education.

Migrants and asylum seekers, including children, arbitrarily detained in facilities controlled by armed groups affiliated with both governments or smugglers and traffickers, suffered inhumane conditions, torture, forced labor, and sexual assault.

## Political Process

The Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU), appointed as an interim authority in 2021 through a UN-led process, controls western Libya alongside affiliated armed groups. Its rival, an armed group known as the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), controls eastern and southern Libya alongside affiliated security apparatuses and militias, and a civilian administration known as the "Libyan Government."

In March, the newly appointed Deputy Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General and acting head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) restarted political talks between Libyan stakeholders.

Talks in Tunis in February and Cairo in July, between members of the rival eastern-based House of Representatives and the Tripoli-based High Council of State, did not reach consensus on election laws. Elections originally scheduled for December 2021 have been postponed indefinitely after Libyan stakeholders failed to agree on a legislative and constitutional basis.

UNSMIL leads a process to consolidate draft reconciliation laws covering amnesties, reparations, truth telling, and justice between the Presidential Council, House of Representatives, High Council of State, and the Constitution Drafting Assembly. As of October, the unified draft law had not yet passed the House of Representatives and had not been put to a vote.

## Armed Conflict

Armed groups and militias nominally operating under the Defense or Interior Ministries of the rival governments clashed frequently. Intermittent fighting between armed groups for control of resources persisted in western Libya and fighting in the capital Tripoli killed 10 people in February.

In May, renewed clashes between competing armed groups linked to the GNU killed one civilian and injured 22 others in Zawiya, west of Tripoli. In August, heavy clashes between armed groups killed at least nine people and injured others in Tajoura, east of Tripoli.

In the east, the LAAF obtained military equipment, including tanks and other weapons, in violation of the UN arms embargo. In July, Italian authorities intercepted a shipment of Chinese combat drones destined for the LAAF.

## Judicial System

Libya's criminal justice system remained riddled with serious due process concerns. Lawyers were unable to freely visit their clients in prison, were not informed of sessions ahead of time, and did not have free access to case documents. Judges, prosecutors, and lawyers remained at risk of harassment by armed groups. Military courts continued to try civilians.

Thirty articles in Libya's penal code provide for the death penalty, including for acts of speech and association. While military and civilian courts continued to impose the death penalty, no executions have been carried out since 2010. As of September, the total number of people with confirmed death sentences were 105, including 19 who were detained.

## Detention

The Justice Ministry exercised at least nominal control over prisons, while armed groups and security agencies operated other detention facilities across the country. Inhumane conditions, including severe overcrowding and ill-treatment are prevalent at facilities run by different groups. Some 30 to 50 percent of prisoners held under the Justice Ministry were in provisional detention due to prosecution delays.

A number of people died in custody under troubling circumstances. Ahmed Abdel Moneim al-Zawi died on July 13 while in the custody of the Internal Security Agency in Ajdabiya in northeastern Libya. Political analyst Seraj Daghman died at the Benghazi General Directorate for Internal Security after seven months of arbitrary detention.

Four politicians and journalists arrested in connection with Daghman's case were released in August without charge, after 10 months of arbitrary detention accusing them of planning to overthrow the army without producing any evidence.

House of Representatives member Ibrahim al-Darsi remained missing after he disappeared in Benghazi in May. Seham Sergewa, also a member of parliament, remained missing after LAAF-affiliated armed men abducted her from her Benghazi home in 2019.

## International Justice

The Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Karim Khan, announced in November 2023 his office's intention to complete active investigations in Libya by the end of 2025. In May, he presented the UN Security Council with a roadmap, including his intention to open an office in Tripoli. He said progress was made on crimes in detention facilities and the 2014 and 2020 conflicts, and said his office provided support to national investigations into crimes committed against migrants.

In April, ICC Deputy Prosecutor Nazhat Shameem Khan conducted an official visit to Tripoli and clarified that "the Office intends to move towards the judicial phase of its activities, while continuing to work on arrest strategies, preservation of evidence, support to national authorities, and ensuring its obligations to protect victims and witnesses."

Saif al-Islam, son of Muammar Gaddafi and wanted by the ICC since 2011 for serious crimes, remained a fugitive. In October, the ICC unsealed six more warrants for commanders and other members of the al-Kaniyat militia.

## Women's Rights

On November 6, the acting Interior Minister in Tripoli, Emad Trabelsi, announced that a newly established "morality police force" would impose wide-ranging measures targeting women and girls in western Libya without a legal basis, and in violation of their rights. These measures included restrictions on clothing and imposing wearing of the Hijab on women and school girls, banning social interactions between men and women who are not related or married, and requiring any woman who wished to travel to provide the written permission of a male guardian.

## Freedoms of Assembly and Association

Libya's penal code stipulates severe punishments, including the death penalty, for establishing "unlawful" associations and prohibits Libyans from joining or establishing international organizations without government permission. Civic groups are unable to operate independently while activists have been forced to self-censor or remain in exile.

Civic groups in Libya faced restrictions on their ability to operate due to legal impediments and a severe crackdown by armed groups, militias, and security agencies affiliated with the two rival governments. The Civil Society Commission, tasked with licensing civic groups, has far-reaching oversight and control over the internal functioning of groups. It can search groups' headquarters, freeze bank accounts, suspend activities, or dissolve groups without a court order. Organizations must obtain its prior approval to receive funding, to conduct activities, or to communicate with foreign parties.

The absence of a unified legal framework compounded the situation. Civic groups submitted a draft Associations law in 2021 to the House of Representatives, but it was not passed. In February, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, alongside Libyan officials and civic groups, initiated a roadmap to adopt a rights-based legal framework for civil society.

## Freedom of Expression

Armed groups, militias and, security agencies cracked down on dissent, and the targeting of political opponents and dissenting voices accelerated.

In January, the LAAF-affiliated Internal Security Agency arrested and detained blogger Maryam Al-Warfalli in the southern city of Sebha, reportedly over Facebook posts criticizing the LAAF's distribution of cooking gas in southern Libya.

On July 8, unidentified armed men abducted political activist Moatassim al-Areebi in the western city of Misrata and released him three days later, after calls for his release from UNSMIL and the United States.

On July 11, the Internal Security Agency in Tripoli detained journalist Ahmed al-Sanussi, who reported on alleged government corruption, releasing him on July 15. The UN and the European Union had intervened and called for his release.

## Derna Flooding

As of June, some 44,800 people remained displaced after a massive storm in September 2023 killed thousands and devasted eastern Libya, and Derna in particular. Libyan authorities have failed to provide adequate compensation and reconstruction support to survivors. Only the eastern administration tied to the LAAF offered limited one-time compensation payments to some victims, while refugees and migrants affected by the floods have been excluded.

On July 28, the Derna Criminal Court convicted 12 Libyan officials to prison terms of up to 27 years for their role in the collapse of two dams upstream of Derna that caused the massive flooding. The officials did not include senior commanders and members of the LAAF who had managed the crisis response.

## Economic Justice

In August, a political standoff between the GNU and Parliament Speaker Agila Saleh over the Central Bank's leadership, triggered by months of disagreements over the budget, resulted in longtime Central Bank Governor Siddiq al-Kabir fleeing the country and

suspending banking operations. In retaliation, eastern authorities shuttered oil fields and terminals. A new central bank governor was sworn in on September 30 following UN mediation and an agreement with the High Council of the State.

The suspension of banking operations froze issuance of letters of credit and deepened economic hardship in Libya. The suspension of crude oil sales, which represent 90 percent of Libya's exports and its sole national income source, resulted in the depreciation of the local currency.

In February, the Tobruk-based House of Representatives established the Libyan Development and Reconstruction Fund, tasked with leading reconstruction efforts across the country. It appointed the son of Libyan National Army Khalifa Hiftar, Belqasim, as its chief. Despite major re-construction underway in Derna, including housing units, the Fund's planning and funding strategy lacks transparency.

## Migrants, Asylum Seekers, and Internally Displaced People

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) recorded over 760,000 migrants in Libya as of July. As of September, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had over 77,000 asylum seekers and refugees registered in Libya. Over 180,000 Sudanese refugees had arrived since April 2023, bringing the total of Sudanese refugees registered with UNHCR Tripoli to 55,447 as of December.

Tunisian forces continued to collectively expel migrants and asylum seekers, many of whom had been intercepted at sea, to the Tunisia-Libya border. As of August, 125,802 people were internally displaced in Libya. These included thousands of residents of Tawergha who were driven out by fighters in 2011. Many remained unable to return due to the deliberate destruction of the town and the scarcity of public services. They also include thousands of families forcibly displaced by the LAAF from Benghazi, Ajdabiya, and Derna since 2014. In August, flooding after heavy rains in the southwestern region of Ghat displaced 7,000 people.

Migrants and asylum seekers continued to attempt to cross from Libya to Europe. As of December, 1,536 people were found dead or went missing in the central Mediterranean after departing Libya.

The European Union and member states continued to cooperate with abusive and sometimes dangerous Libyan Coast Guard forces, providing supplies, technical support, and aerial surveillance to help them intercept Europe-bound migrants at sea . As of September, Libyan forces intercepted or rescued 16,466 migrants and asylum seekers and returned them to risks of serious harm in Libya.

# Malawi

The human rights situation in Malawi remains challenging, with limited progress recorded in 2024. The country's anti-homosexuality laws contravene several regional and international human rights treaties that Malawi has ratified. In June, Malawi's Constitutional Court rejected a legal challenge to decriminalize same-sex conduct. With the case's dismissal, the power to review and amend the Penal Code to end anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) discrimination now lies with the country's parliament.

Abortion is still criminalized and heavily restricted in Malawi. The government has not enacted the Termination of Pregnancy Bill, which would regulate abortion.

On a positive note, to address violence and abuse against older people and to safeguard older people's rights and welfare, Malawi enacted the Older Persons Law in June 2024.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In June, Malawi's Constitutional Court rejected a legal challenge to the constitutionality of the vague and overly broad provisions of Penal Code sections 153, 154, and 156. These sections can result in sentences of up to 14 years' imprisonment for anyone found guilty of having "carnal knowledge" of any person "against the order of nature," attempts to commit an "unnatural offence" or undertakes "indecent practices."

The court's decision exacerbates risks of arbitrary arrests and prosecutions against LGBT people, as well as the unlawful shutdown of LGBT rights organizations.

## Rights of Older People

The number of older people abused and killed in Malawi as a result of witchcraft allegations continued to rise. The Malawi Network of Older Persons Organizations (MANEPO) documented a 68 percent rise in reported attacks and abuse of older people between 2020 and 2021, with 15 killed in 2002, and 25 in 2023. In January 2024 alone, six older people were reportedly killed on allegations of witchcraft. MANEPO told Human

Rights Watch that by September, 18 older people had been killed and 123 had faced various human rights abuses.

In 2024, Malawi enacted the Older Persons Bill to safeguard older people's rights and welfare. While the law seeks to address violence and abuse of older people alongside other rights, it is not fully compliant with Malawi's human rights obligations under regional and international human rights standards, including on older people's right to live a secure and dignified life. Malawi ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2017, under which it is obligated to protect the right of older people with disabilities to live independently within the community.

## Right to Education

Although Malawi adopted constitutional protections that prohibit child marriage in 2017, and revised its guidelines on school readmission in 2018 to ensure girls can resume their education after a pregnancy, implementation remains a challenge. Reasons include lack of awareness of government law and policy, deeply entrenched social and cultural norms regarding teenage pregnancy and child marriage, poverty and inability to pay for school materials, and gaps in implementation of the readmission policy.

Reports indicate that some girls may face sexual exploitation by adults in exchange for money to buy school materials such as books and uniforms. Parents from low-income households may also encourage their adolescent daughters to marry for economic reasons and therefore see it as an "acceptable practice."

Malawi is yet to develop mechanisms to follow up on and keep track of students who drop out of school, including due to pregnancy or marriage, with the aim of initiating their return to school. Malawi is also yet to adopt an unconditional positive continuation policy that outlines schools' obligations to safeguard and monitor the implementation of the right to education for married, pregnant, and parenting children and older students. Such a policy would encourage pregnant students to remain in school for as long as they choose to, and not prescribe rigid compulsory leave after giving birth.

## Right to Health

Malawi's public healthcare spending falls far short of its commitments under the 2001 Abuja Declaration, in which governments of countries in the African Union set a target of allocating at least 15 percent of their national budgets to improve health care. The health budget allocation was 8.8 percent of the national budget in 2023/24 and 12 percent in the 2024/25 budget. While this represents an improvement on previous years, it falls short of public healthcare spending standards required to achieve universal health coverage and related healthcare goals fundamental to the realization of the right to health.

## Rights of Women and Girls

Maternal mortality in Malawi stands at 381 deaths per 100,000 live births, placing Malawi among the 25 countries with the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. Many women and girls still experience poor quality maternal health services. In particular, women and girls still experience obstetric violence when seeking antenatal care, intrapartum care, and postnatal care. In Malawi, obstetric violence—abuse, and mistreatment meted out against pregnant women and girls in healthcare facilities when they seek reproductive health services—persists because laws and policies and the methods of their implementation are not responsive to the realities of women and girls.

Abortion is criminalized and heavily restricted in Malawi. The government has not enacted the Termination of Pregnancy Bill, proposed by the Law Commission on the Review of the Law on Abortion in 2016, and would regulate abortion and clarify the instances in which it is allowed. Consequently, women and girls are forced to resort to unsafe abortion, which is responsible for 17 percent of maternal mortality in the country and even more morbidity.

## Freedom of Expression

In February, top investigative journalist Gregory Gondwe went into hiding after the Malawi Defence Force (MDF) threatened to arrest him. This followed a report Gondwe wrote exposing the military's multi-million-dollar payments to companies owned by a businessman under investigation for corruption. A statement issued by the regional nongovernmental organization Media Institute of Southern Africa Malawi described the threats toward Gondwe as having a chilling effect on journalists and the media in Malawi, and an attempt to intimidate whistleblowers who wish to report corrupt practices.

# Malaysia

Under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, the Malaysian government has backtracked on pledges to address repression and corruption. Authorities expanded the government's censorship powers and regularly use broad and vaguely worded laws to criminalize free speech. Refugees and migrants face arbitrary, indefinite detention without judicial oversight. Officials have targeted lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people with hateful rhetoric and crackdowns.

## Freedoms of Expression and Assembly

The government has proposed amendments to expand powers of repressive laws, including the Sedition Act 1948 and the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998.

In April, political activist Badrul Hisham Shaharin, known as Chegubard, was charged with sedition for a Facebook post citing a Bloomberg report on Prime Minister Anwar's alleged involvement in issuing a casino license for Forest City. Chegubard also faces two counts of sedition and defaming King Ibrahim Iskander for other social media posts.

In May, blogger Wan Muhammad Azri Wan Deris, known as Papagomo, was charged with sedition against the king for an X post.

In August, former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin was charged with sedition for questioning the previous king's use of constitutional power. Anwar has repeatedly defended the Sedition Act.

Malaysia's new Cyber Security Act, which came into force in August, further expands the government's powers to police online expression, including against journalists.

Effective January 1, 2025, social media platforms with at least eight million registered users must apply for a license to operate, according to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission. Civil society groups said the regulations lack clear guidelines and oversight.

## Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants

Malaysia is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and lacks domestic asylum procedures. About 190,000 refugees and asylum seekers—including over 110,000 ethnic Rohingya Muslims and some 54,280 children—are registered with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) but are not granted legal status, unable to formally work or enroll in government schools.

The Malaysian government is detaining about 16,000 migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in immigration detention centers. Detainees spend months or years in overcrowded, unhygienic conditions, routinely subjected to physical and psychological abuse, without judicial oversight and at risk of indefinite detention. Inadequate medical care and malnutrition is widespread in these facilities.

From January to June, there were 20 reported deaths in Malaysia's immigration detention centers.

The government has denied UNHCR access to immigration detention centers since August 2019 including Baitul Mahabbah centers, dedicated facilities for children ages 10 and younger that were launched in September 2023. At the time of writing, there are 170 children—some unaccompanied—in Baitul Mahabbah centers, which do not provide a genuine alternative to detention.

Malaysian authorities have conducted 11,900 immigration raids and detained at least 28,000 undocumented migrants between January and August.

In September, reportedly at request of the Cambodian authorities, the Malaysian authorities deported Nuon Thoeun for criticizing Cambodia's leadership on Facebook. She now faces politically motivated incitement charges.

## Criminal Justice System

While Malaysia abolished the mandatory death penalty in 2023, it retains the death sentence for drug trafficking under the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952. Courts regularly convict people of drug-related offenses based on legal presumptions of guilt, shifting the burden of proof onto the defendant. Sixty-five percent of death row inmates were convicted of drug

trafficking. Those spared the death penalty can still face corporal punishment, which amounts to torture under international law.

Malaysia detains individuals without trial under restrictive laws. The Security Offenses (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA) allows for preventive detention of up to 28 days without judicial review for a broad range of "security offenses." In July, a bill to amend SOSMA was tabled for the first reading in parliament. The Malaysian Bar has called for SOSMA to be repealed.

The Prevention of Crime Act (POCA) 1959 and the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 allow government-appointed boards to impose detention without trial for up to two years, renewable indefinitely.

## Freedom of Religion

Malaysia restricts the rights of followers of any branches of Islam other than Sunni, with those following Shia or other branches subject to arrest for deviancy.

In January, the two filmmakers of "Mentega Terbang" were charged for "wounding religious feelings" under section 298 of the Penal Code. The film features a Muslim teenager exploring other faiths.

In May, KK Mart founder Chai Kee Kan and his wife, company director Loh Siew Mui, were charged with "wounding religious feelings" for selling socks printed with the word "Allah."

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

State-sponsored discrimination against LGBT people remains pervasive in Malaysia, including the funding of conversion practices. Federal law punishes "carnal intercourse against the order of nature," interpreted as adult consensual same-sex conduct, with up to 20 years in prison and mandatory caning. State and federal territory Sharia (Islamic law) criminalize both same-sex activity and gender nonconformity.

In March, Home Minister Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution Ismail said that Malaysia "does not recognize any LGBTQ lifestyle" and that the government would continue banning films featuring "LGBTQ themes."

## Women's Rights

The Dewan Rakyat passed a bill to amend the Federal Constitution to grant Malaysian citizenship to children born overseas to Malaysian mothers and foreign fathers. The citizenship amendment bill is not comprehensive and excludes those born before the law's passage.

In March, police summoned four people and launched another investigation into an International Women's Day rally in Kuala Lumpur under the Peaceful Assembly Act and Minor Offences Act.

## Environment and Indigenous Peoples' Rights

The government met twice with the European Commission to resolve tensions over a European Union law that will restrict imports of wood and palm oil products linked to deforestation. In September, it obstructed civil society's access to these talks.

Business operations continued in forests claimed by Indigenous peoples, including a carbon agreement in Sabah. In Perak, a high court ruled the government failed to protect Indigenous land from encroachment by hydropower companies.

In June, Sabah authorities forcibly evicted hundreds of Bajau Laut – a stateless, nomadic, ethnolinguistic group. Mukmin Nantang, the Sabahan activist who exposed the evictions, is under police investigation for sedition.

# Maldives

Since assuming office in November 2023, President Mohamed Muizzu's administration has made little progress on human rights, failing to amend abusive laws and announcing plans to reinstate the death penalty. Furthermore, the government failed to enforce its own environmental protection laws and sought to block important climate litigation efforts.

## Freedom of Expression and Assembly

The Muizzu government kept in place the abusive Freedom of Peaceful Assembly Act, which imposes severe restrictions on the right to assembly, despite having repeatedly promised to amend the law. The law requires prior government approval for public demonstrations and limits where they can be held. On August 28, the authorities arrested two women for peacefully protesting Israeli government rights violations against Palestinians outside diplomatic missions in the capital, Malé.

On July 25, after Bangladeshi nationals in a southern atoll held a peaceful protest in support of student protests in Bangladesh, Maldivian authorities responded by threatening to deport the protesters, citing a visa condition that prohibits migrants from engaging in "political activities" – a restriction that violates international human rights law. According to local rights groups, on September 4 the Ministry of Homeland Security and Technology stated that "so far" none of the protesters had been deported.

## Criminal Justice

The authorities seldom investigate and prosecute perpetrators of threats, intimidation, and violence against civil society groups and critical voices in the Maldives. The families of journalist Ahmed Rilwan, who was forcibly disappeared in 2014, and Yameen Rasheed, a blogger and government critic who was murdered in 2017, still await justice. In May, the government pledged to publish the findings of the Commission on Deaths and Disappearances' investigation, however, to date the findings had not been released.

In the early stages of his presidency, Muizzu's government announced plans to reinstate the death penalty, which would end a de facto moratorium on its use that dates back to the 1950s. Rights groups have raised serious concerns about the enforcement of the death

penalty in the Maldives, particularly given the judiciary's history of corruption, politicization, and failure to provide justice and accountability for past crimes. Human Rights Watch opposes the death penalty in all circumstances.

In August, the Ministry of Homeland Security and Technology proposed an amendment to the Drug Act to impose the death penalty for individuals convicted of smuggling upwards of 500 grams of drugs.

## Climate Change and Environmental Harm

As an atoll island country, the Maldives is highly exposed to sea-level rise and the impacts of climate change. However, efforts to adapt without adequate consultations (e.g., through reclamation) have threatened people's rights. Despite having significant environmental protection laws like the Environmental Protection and Preservation Act, enforcement remains weak, with authorities routinely bypassing local community consultations and ignoring recommendations from environmental impact assessments.

In February, the Malé High Court issued an injunction suspending work on a controversial reclamation project after a lawsuit cited the risk of serious economic, environmental, and cultural harm to the local community. However, the Supreme Court overturned the decision after the government appealed, citing financial losses it would incur. The United Nations special rapporteur on the right to a healthy environment, David Boyd, noted potential interference by powerful interest groups in the case, saying that he had encountered other disturbing examples of judges and environmental advocates being harassed or intimidated in legal cases related to development projects.

## Women's rights

Despite a strong push by women's rights organizations, Maldives does not prohibit female genital mutilation. Reports indicate that around 12 percent of girls in the country are subject to the harmful practice.

Maldives' domestic violence law needs improvements as survivors still face many difficulties to obtain protection and justice.

## Migrant Workers

The Maldives has the highest proportion of foreign migrant laborers in South Asia, representing about one-third of its entire population, many of whom are undocumented. Migrant workers face a range of entrenched abuses from employers, including deceptive recruitment practices, wage theft, passport confiscation, unsafe living and working conditions, and excessive work demands that may amount to forced labor and violate domestic and international law.

UN experts and rights groups urged the Maldivian government to ratify the International Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and enact laws to guarantee safe working conditions and protection from labor rights violations for migrant workers.

## Freedom of Media

The Evidence Act, enacted in 2022, is a vague law that grants courts discretionary powers to compel journalists to disclose their sources. The law is cited as one of the main reasons for the Maldives' recent decline in the World Press Freedom Index, dropping six places in 2024 to 106th out of 180 countries. Despite government promises to amend the law, it remains in place.

Independent media outlets RaajjeTV and Channel 13 and their staff faced online threats in 2024 from people using anonymous social media profiles. Rights groups called for a transparent investigation into the threats, which contributed to a "fearful atmosphere" for journalists and media workers.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Adult consensual same-sex sexual conduct remains a criminal offense under the Maldivian penal code. Punishment can include prison sentences of up to eight years and lashes for both men and women. Same-sex marriage is illegal and punishable by up to one year in prison.

In September, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern about "high levels of violence, discrimination and stigmatization faced by people on the basis of their sexual orientation" in the Maldives and urged the government to address such abuses.

# Mali

The human rights situation in Mali deteriorated in 2024, as attacks against civilians by Islamist armed groups and abusive counterterrorism operations by Malian armed forces and associated foreign fighters continued. In August, there were clashes between the Malian armed forces and affiliated foreign fighters and a coalition of armed groups, the Permanent Strategic Framework (Cadre Stratégique Permanent, CSP), an alliance of mostly ethnic Tuareg armed groups that have sought independence for the Malian northern region they call Azawad. This followed the end of a peace deal between the two parties in January. Ethnic militias also committed abuses against civilians. By late August, over 600,000 Malians were displaced within and outside of the country, and over 10,000 Malian asylum seekers and migrants had arrived by boat to Spain's Canary Islands, surpassing all other nationalities.

On September 18, the Al Qaeda-linked group Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) attacked a gendarmerie training school and a military base in Bamako, killing several security force members, a rare attack in Mali's capital city.

Authorities cracked down on media and the political opposition, narrowing the civic space. In May, participants in the "Malian national dialogue," nation-wide discussions largely boycotted by the opposition, recommended extending the military junta-led transition to democratic rule by three years, allowing junta leader Assimi Goita to stand in a future election. In September 2023, the government's spokesman, Abdoulaye Maiga, announced that the presidential election scheduled for February 2024 would be postponed for "technical reasons." Also postponed was the adoption of a new constitution.

In January, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger announced they would leave the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a move that would limit opportunities for their citizens to seek justice for human rights violations.

## Atrocities by Islamist Armed Groups

The non-governmental organization ACLED reported that Islamist armed groups carried out 326 attacks against civilians, resulting in 478 people killed between January 1 and October 31.

On January 27, JNIM fighters led simultaneous attacks on village of Ogota and Ouémbé, Mopti region. They killed 28 villagers in Ogota, including 3 children, and 4 villagers in Ouémbé. They also burned at least 150 homes in Ogota and 130 homes in Ouémbé, then returned on February 1 to burn the remaining homes. Villagers said they believed they were attacked because some members of the Dan Na Ambassagou militia refused to lay down their weapons following a deal between the militia and JNIM. The Dan Na Ambassagou is an umbrella organization of self-defense groups established in 2016 "to protect the Dogon country," which provided security in Ogota, Ouémbé, and surrounding villages.

On July 19, alleged Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) fighters attacked a camp for displaced persons, all of whom were ethnic Dawsahak, killing a total of eight men, including four older men. The attack was in apparent retaliation against ethnic Dawsahak people, whom the ISGS accuses of being members of the militia known as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (*Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad*, MSA-D), once allied with the Malian government since a 2015 peace agreement, and which has carried out attacks against the ISGS in Mali's northeast, at times reportedly siding with the JNIM.

Between June and October, JNIM fighters attacked at least nine villages in Doucombo district area, Bandiagara region, burning over 1,000 homes and looting over 3,500 livestock. According to witness accounts and satellite images analyzed by Human Rights Watch, on June 25, JNIM fighters attacked Tegourou village, burning at least ten homes; on July 1, they attacked Djiguibombo, burning several homes and the local health center; on August 24, they attacked Tilé village and burned over 500 homes; on September 29, they attacked Pel Kanda, Songo, Ndiombo, and Antaba villages, burning at least 450 homes, of which at least 150 in Pel Kanda, 100 in Songo, and about the same number in Ndiombo and Antaba, and on October 13 and 14, they attacked the villages of Danibombo 2 and Danibombo 1 respectively, burning at least 100 homes. They also killed two men in Tegourou, at least 10 men in Djiguibombo, one man in Pel Kanda, four men and one woman in Songo, six men in Danibombo 2, and injured six other men in Danibombo 1. Witnesses said the attacks were in retaliation against local communities whom the JNIM accused of collaborating with the Dan Na Ambassagou militia.

## Abuses by State Security Forces

According to ACLED, Malian security forces and allied forces carried out 239 operations against civilians, resulting in 1,021 people killed between January 1 and October 11, compared to 184 operations resulting in 632 people killed over the same period in 2023.

Malian and allied foreign fighters apparently associated with the Russia-linked Wagner Group were implicated in unlawful killings of civilians during counterterrorism operations in central and northern Mali.

On January 25, Malian armed forces and Wagner fighters carried out a military operation in Attara village, Timbuktu region. They threatened villagers with death, summarily killed seven civilian men, and looted property.

The same day, Wagner fighters, with at least one Malian soldier, attacked the ethnic-Bozo settlement of Dakka Sebbe, Segou region. They tortured three ethnic-Fulani men whom they suspected of collaborating with Islamist armed groups.

The following day, Malian soldiers, searching for Islamist fighters in Ouro Fero village, Nara region, arrested 25 people, including 4 children. Later the same day, villagers found the charred bodies of the 25 people who were arrested about four kilometers from Ouro Fero.

On February 16, a Malian drone bombed a wedding celebration in Konokassi village, Segou region, killing at least five men and two boys. The following day, as villagers attempted to bury the bodies of those killed during the wedding, a second drone strike hit a group of people at the Konokassi cemetery, killing five men and two boys.

On May 2, during a counter-insurgency operation in N'Dola, Segou region, Malian soldiers killed six civilian men and arrested eight other men. On May 9, soldiers returned to N'Dola and burned down up to 100 homes.

On May 3, a group of Malian soldiers and Wagner fighters killed two men and one boy in Barikoro, a village in a JNIM-controlled area in Segou region.

On August 9 and 16, Malian soldiers and Wagner fighters conducted two separate counter-insurgency operations in Ala and Dounkala villages, Segou region, disappearing two men in Ala and two others in Dounkala and killing one man in Dounkala.

Malian drone strikes, which the Malian armed forces claimed targeted armed group members, killed at least five children and two men in Tinzaouaten, Kidal region, on August 25.

On October 8, during a counter-insurgency operation in Ndorgolle village, Segou region, Malian soldiers and Wagner fighters killed two men and arrested three other men.

## Abuses by Ethnic Militias

In January, Dozo militiamen attacked Kalala village, Segou region, and killed 13 people, including three older men, one of them blind, an older woman, and two children. The Dozo, or "traditional hunting societies," consisting mainly of ethnic Bambara, have acted as village self-defense forces in the Segou and Mopti regions since about 2014. Human Rights Watch has documented Dozo abuses against Fulani civilians, as well as allegations that Dozo and other self-defense groups have acted as Malian army proxies. The attack in Kalala, with a predominantly Fulani population, was in apparent retaliation for JNIM attacks against ethnic-Bambara in surrounding villages in late 2023.

In the same month, Dozo militiamen abducted 24 people in Boura, a village with a predominantly Fulani population in Segou region. They also looted homes and livestock. The attack was in apparent retaliation against ethnic Fulani whom the Dozo accuse of collaborating with the JNIM.

## Attacks on Civil and Political Rights

Mali's junta cracked down on peaceful dissent, political opposition, civil society, and the media, shrinking the country's civic and political space. Authorities dissolved political and civil society organizations, forcibly disappeared at least one whistleblower, and arrested journalists.

On April 10, the Council of Ministers adopted a decree suspending the activities of political parties and associations across the country "until further notice." The action appeared to be in response to the March 31 call by more than 80 political parties and associations for a return to constitutional order by holding presidential elections as soon as possible. In July, the junta lifted the ban on political party activities.

The junta dissolved at least three civil society associations in 2024, including the Association of Pupils and Students of Mali (L'Association des élèves et étudiants du Mali, AEEM), the Coordination of Movements, Associations, and Sympathizers of Imam Mahmoud Dicko (Coordination des mouvements, associations et sympathisants de l'imam Mahmoud Dicko, CMAS), and Kaoural Renewal (Kaoural Renouveau).

## Accountability for Abuses

There was little progress in government investigations into several incidents of reported abuse.

On June 21, the International Criminal Court (ICC) unsealed an arrest warrant against the alleged former head of Ansar Dine, an abusive Islamist armed group, for alleged crimes committed in northern Mali between 2012 and 2013. Also in June, the court convicted a former senior official of Al-Qaida in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) on some of the war crimes and crimes against humanity charges brought against him.

# Mexico

President Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo, who took office in October, inherited a human rights crisis rooted in extreme violence by organized crime groups and widespread abuse by state agents with near total impunity. Her predecessor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-2024) made little progress addressing these challenges.

In September, Congress approved a series of constitutional changes proposed by López Obrador, including an expansion of the military's role in policing and a sweeping overhaul of the justice system, that could perpetuate abuses and severely undermine the rule of law.

## Criminal Violence

There are extremely high rates of violent crime, including homicide, in many parts of Mexico. Six cities registered homicide rates higher than 100 per 100,000 residents in 2022. Nationally, the homicide rate fell slightly, for the third year in a row, from 25.9 per 100,000 in 2022 to 24.9 per 100,000 in 2023, although the number of reported disappearances has increased. Security analysts estimate that around two-thirds of homicides are committed by organized crime. Two-thirds of homicides in 2023 were committed with firearms, according to official figures. Authorities estimate that around 70 percent of firearms used in crimes are smuggled into Mexico from the United States.

## Judicial Independence

In September, a constitutional amendment was approved that will require all state and federal judges, including Supreme Court and Electoral Tribunal justices, to step down and be replaced through popular elections in 2025 and 2027. A new Judicial Disciplinary Tribunal will also be created with broad powers to sanction or remove judges. The UN special rapporteur for the independence of judges and lawyers and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights warned that the measure is likely to weaken judicial independence and undermine the right to a fair trial.

## Criminal Justice System

The criminal justice system is extremely ineffective. Prosecutors fail to effectively investigate or prosecute or otherwise ensure accountability for the vast majority of crimes and human rights abuses, including abuses by state security forces and serious offenses like homicide and enforced disappearances. Just 16 percent of criminal investigations were resolved in 2022, either in court, through mediation, or through some form of compensation. Victims often struggle to obtain accountability. Those accused of crimes are regularly subjected to serious abuses, including torture and excessive pre-trial detention.

## Torture

Authorities often use torture to obtain confessions and extract information. In the most recent survey of incarcerated people conducted by Mexico's national statistics office in July 2021, nearly half of respondents said that, after they were detained, police or soldiers had subjected them to physical abuse. Among those who had confessed to a crime, 38 percent said they did so only because authorities had beaten or threatened them.

Authorities received 6,226 criminal complaints of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in 2022, according the National Torture Observatory, a project run by a collective of human rights organizations. Only 82 cases that year led to criminal charges and only 10 resulted in a guilty or not-guilty verdict.

## Arbitrary Detention

In September, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention presented the findings from its 2023 visit to Mexico. The working group expressed concern that "arbitrary detention remains a widespread practice in Mexico and is too often the catalyst for ill-treatment, torture, enforced disappearance and arbitrary executions."

Authorities often misuse the *in flagrante* provision in Mexican law, which allows them to arrest a person caught in the act of committing a crime, by "planting drugs in their homes, vehicles, bags, or clothes" to detain people and question or torture them without a lawyer present, the working group found.

People accused of crimes often face extended periods of pre-trial detention. Approximately 37 percent of incarcerated people in 2023 were not convicted of any crime and more than 20 percent of those in pre-trial detention had been there for more than two years. Judges are legally required to order pretrial detention for those accused of more than a dozen categories of crime, without evaluating the circumstances of the case, which violates international human rights standards.

In November, Congress approved a constitutional amendment to expand the list of crimes requiring mandatory pre-trial detention, in violation of rulings by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which had ordered Mexico to eliminate the practice.

## Disappearances

In January, the government closed the office of the National Human Identification Center, a government body operated by the National Search Commission, and fired many of its staff, journalists reported. The center was created in 2022 to address the lack of forensic capacity in many prosecutors' offices which contributes to disappearances.

More than 115,000 people were considered missing as of September 2024. Most have gone missing since 2006. Many missing people may have been killed and buried in the nearly 5,700 clandestine graves that activists and authorities have uncovered. Around 53,000 human remains were in storage, awaiting identification at the close of 2022. Other missing people may have been marked as "unidentified" and buried in municipal graves by authorities. In September, journalists found that more than 72,000 human remains had been labeled as unidentified by state morgues from 2006 to 2023. Most had been buried in municipal graves. In 2022, around 15,000 human remains processed by morgues were not identified.

When families report disappearances, authorities often fail to investigate. Victims' families have formed more than 230 "search collectives" to investigate disappearances. Members of these collectives search prisons, hospitals, morgues, and often locate and dig up clandestine graves. They often face threats and violence. In February, human rights organizations reported, at a hearing before the IACHR, that 16 members of these collectives had been killed during the López Obrador administration.

The government has been slow to implement many measures required by the 2017 Disappearances Law, such as the creation of the national forensic database. Former president López Obrador repeatedly, falsely claimed the official number of missing people had been exaggerated to harm him politically.

## Poverty and Inequality

Mexico has one of the highest rates of income inequality in the world, according to 2022 data from the World Inequality Lab. It also had the lowest tax-to-GDP ratio of the OECD and one of the lowest in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2022. The poverty rate fell under López Obrador's presidency, from 41.9 percent in 2018 to 36.3 percent in 2022, according to the official poverty analysis agency, although extreme poverty remained unchanged and the number of people without access to health care more than doubled. The government and independent analysts have pointed to a major increase in the minimum wage and a near-doubling of remittances from Mexicans abroad as contributors to the drop in poverty.

## Privacy and Access to Information

In November, Congress voted to eliminate the independent privacy and transparency watchdog, the National Institute for Transparency, Access to Information, and Data Protection. The UN special rapporteurs for privacy and freedom of expression warned the proposal would seriously undermine the rights to privacy and access to information.

Under former president López Obrador over 100 civilian government tasks were transferred to the military, reducing access to information about public spending, since the military often refuses to comply with transparency and access to information rules, citing national security concerns. López Obrador also issued executive orders intended to exempt the government from complying with transparency requirements regarding certain megaprojects.

The military has used the spyware Pegasus to unlawfully spy on human rights defenders, journalists, opposition party politicians, and senior government officials. During the López Obrador administration, journalists reported that the attorney general's office used spyware capable of tracking cell phones without judicial authorization and that Mexico

City prosecutors obtained the phone records of opposition politicians without judicial authorization.

## Attacks on Journalists and Human Rights Defenders

Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists and human rights defenders. From December 1, 2018, to March 31, 2024, the Mexico office of the British human rights group Article 19 registered 3,408 attacks or threats against journalists, 46 journalists killed, and four disappeared. Many journalists self-censor. In 2023, 14 human rights defenders were killed, according to the human rights group Comité Cerezo and 18 environmental or land defenders were killed according to the organization Global Witness.

Authorities routinely fail to adequately investigate crimes against journalists and human rights defenders. The federal special prosecutor's office to investigate crimes against journalists had opened 1,758 investigations and obtained 41 convictions, including eight for homicide, from its creation in 2010 through August 2024. Most convictions have been obtained since the current special prosecutor was appointed in 2017.

## Abuses by the Military

In September, Congress amended the constitution to eliminate the prohibition on the military exercising non-military functions outside wartime, give the military permanent control over the National Guard, the main federal law enforcement agency, and officially authorize the president to indefinitely deploy the military domestically at her discretion.

The military has been used for fighting drug trafficking and organized crime and conducting other government tasks for decades with extremely limited civilian oversight. Soldiers have been implicated in a wide range of serious abuses against civilians, including torture, arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances. These accusations are rarely effectively investigated by civilian authorities. As of September 2024, there were 232,761 soldiers, marines, and National Guard members deployed throughout the country.

From 2007 through July 2024, the Army reported killing 5,696 people, whom it claimed were members of criminal groups. These killings are usually not independently investigated by civilian authorities.

The military has obstructed the investigation and prosecution of past human rights abuses, including the 2014 Ayotzinapa mass kidnapping case and widespread military abuses committed during the Cold War. Investigators said the military has hidden, destroyed, or denied the existence of records of human rights violations and pressured authorities to drop criminal charges against soldiers implicated in abuses.

## Access to Abortion

Access to abortion has expanded significantly but many people still face barriers. As of December, 19 states decriminalized abortion in all circumstances up to at least 12 weeks of pregnancy. In August, Aguascalientes state reduced its limit from 12 weeks to 6 weeks, effectively outlawing abortion access.

All states allow abortion in certain exceptional cases, such as rape. However, even in legally eligible cases, abortion bans with exceptions do not guarantee access, Human Rights Watch found in August.

Barriers to access include healthcare providers denying or delaying services, withholding information, questioning the veracity of sexual violence survivors' statements, subjecting women to mistreatment, and imposing arbitrary requirements for access that contradict existing law and regulations. Fear of legal repercussions also deters both healthcare personnel and people seeking abortion.

The Supreme Court ruled in 2021 that the absolute criminalization of abortion is unconstitutional. In 2023, the court ordered Congress to expunge the abortion prohibition from the federal criminal code. As of September, Congress had not complied with the ruling.

## Migrants and Asylum Seekers

People who transit Mexico to seek asylum in the US are now required to wait in Mexico for an appointment through a US government-run mobile phone application. Mexican soldiers and immigration agents detain or turn back migrants without appointments, Human Rights Watch found in a report published in May. Authorities carried out nearly 830,000 apprehensions of migrants from January to July 2024—the highest number ever. Many migrants apprehended in northern Mexico, around 10,000 per month, including those with appointments, are sent to southern Mexico by bus.

Migrants and asylum seekers are routinely targeted by criminal groups and Mexican officials for serious abuses, including sexual assault, armed robbery, kidnapping, and extortion.

Under former president López Obrador, the national refugee agency expanded its presence, from 4 offices in 2018 to 13 in 2024, with assistance from the UN refugee agency. The system remains overstretched. More than 140,000 people sought refugee status in 2023, the highest number ever. The agency resolved just under 26,000 cases that year. In 74 percent of cases it granted refugee status or complementary protection, but access to the procedure and its efficient functioning are still problematic.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Same-sex marriage is available in all 32 states. In 2024, Yucatán and Campeche states passed laws allowing transgender people to change their names and gender markers on birth certificates through a simple administrative process, bringing the number of states recognizing this right to 23.

In 2019, the Mexican Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling with clear guidelines on legal gender recognition, holding that it must be an administrative process that "meets the standards of privacy, simplicity, expeditiousness, and adequate protection of gender identity" set by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In March 2022, the court expanded the right to legal gender recognition to include adolescents and other children.

## Disability Rights

Mexico has made some advances in protecting the rights of people with physical and psychosocial disabilities in recent years. However, in many states, they are still denied full legal capacity and face other barriers to accessing justice, education, and exercising other fundamental rights. Many are forced to rely on assistance from their families or live in institutions, which is inconsistent with their right to live independently and be included in the community under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

In August, Mexico City became the first of Mexico's 32 states to reform its civil code to eliminate guardianship and guarantee that everyone over 18 has full legal capacity to make decisions about their lives. In 2023, Congress approved a national code of civil procedure recognizing the right to full legal capacity.

Women with disabilities suffer disproportionate violence. In 2023, Congress approved reforms requiring domestic violence shelters to be accessible for women with disabilities.

## Climate Policy and Impacts

As one of the world's top 15 emitters of greenhouse gases, Mexico is contributing to the climate crisis that is taking a growing toll on human rights around the globe. Former president López Obrador pursued a policy of investment in fossil fuels as a route to energy self-sufficiency. In 2022, Mexico updated its emission reductions target to allow for higher emissions levels than it had initially pledged in the 2016 Paris Agreement. The Climate Action Tracker rated this pledge as "critically insufficient" to meet the Paris Agreement goal to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

President Claudia Sheinbaum has pledged to continue investing in fossil fuels while also making efforts to reduce vehicle emissions, improve energy efficiency, and increase renewable energy production.

# Morocco and Western Sahara

Moroccan authorities continued their crackdown on dissent and security forces forcibly dispersed peaceful protests. King Mohammed VI pardoned nearly 5,000 cannabis farmers and 708 people who had been detained for other crimes, but left out activists from the Hirak movement serving up to 20 years in prison for protesting living conditions. To commemorate 25 years on the throne, the king also pardoned nearly 2,500 detainees in July, including three outspoken critics of government policy.

## Freedom of Speech

On November 11, a court in Rabat sentenced a journalist, Hamid Mahdaoui, to 18 months in prison for alleged defamation against the justice minister and fined him 1.5 million Moroccan dirhams (approximately US$150,000).

On October 30, Moroccan police arrested prominent human rights and democracy activist Fouad Abdelmoumni and released him provisionally the same day. On November 1, a Casablanca court charged him with "insulting organized bodies [institutions], publishing false allegations, and reporting an imaginary crime that he knows did not occur." As of December 11, Abdelmoumni was awaiting trial.

Journalists Omar Radi, Soulaiman Raissouni, and Taoufik Bouachrine were released from prison in July alongside 2,500 others, after being granted a royal amnesty by the king. All three had been arrested, tried, or imprisoned on questionable charges of sexual misconduct, a tactic used by authorities in recent years to discredit dissidents.

Authorities continued their crackdown on dissent. In March, they arrested blogger Youssef El Hireche for a Facebook post deemed insulting to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) ruler, and in May, the Qunaitra First Instance Court, sentenced him to 18 months in prison for Facebook posts "[i]nsulting a public official, insulting organized bodies, and distributing confidential information without the owner's consent."

In March, authorities arrested blogger Abderrahman Zankad, who is affiliated with an Islamist party, over Facebook posts critical of Morocco's decision to "normalize" relations

with Israel. He was subsequently sentenced to five years in prison for insulting the king, deemed an "insult to a constitutional institution and incitement."

In a similar case, an appeals court in November 2023 upheld the sentencing of blogger Said Boukioud for "insulting the king," in Facebook posts in 2020 in which he criticized Morocco's normalization agreement with Israel. The court reduced the sentence from five to three years.

## Freedom of Assembly

Security forces forcibly dispersed peaceful protests. This included the use of force against a demonstration organized by disability rights groups outside parliament in May and protests organized by healthcare workers in July.

A group of 40 Hirak protesters, including leaders Nasser Zefzafi and Nabil Ahamjik, remained imprisoned, serving decades-long sentences after an appeals court upheld their convictions in 2019, despite credible allegations of confessions obtained under torture.

## Penal Code

The penal code criminalizes several aspects of private life. Abortion is criminalized with a penalty of up to two years in prison and five years for abortion providers. Exceptions under Article 453 apply only when the mother's health is at risk. The justice minister in 2021 withdrew from parliamentary review a proposed draft amendment which would have legalized abortion in cases of rape, incest, "mental illness of the mother," and "foetal impairment."

Sex outside of marriage is punishable by at least one year of imprisonment according to Article 490, and up to two years for adultery under Article 491. Same-sex relations are criminalized with up to three years in prison under Article 489.

## Women's and Girl's Rights

The 2004 Family Code provides that a child's father is the default legal representative, even if the mother has responsibility for the child after a divorce. Women and girls inherit half of what their male relatives receive. Judges can grant "exemptions" to the minimum

age of 18 for marriage, and families can request approval for girls as young as 15 to marry. Marital rape is not explicitly criminalized, and those who report rape outside of marriage risk being prosecuted for engaging in illegal sexual intercourse.

A 2018 law on violence against women criminalized some forms of domestic violence and established prevention and protection measures. However, it also created barriers for survivors to access protections, failed to delineate the duty of care for police, prosecutors, and investigative judges, and did not allocate funding for women's shelters.

## Migrants and Refugees

In September, Moroccan security forces blocked thousands of Moroccans and other African nationals from crossing into the Spanish border town of Ceuta, following mass mobilization on social media platforms encouraging people to leave due to the deteriorating economic situation. Moroccan authorities arrested 152 people after the incident, whom they accused of rallying people to attempt the mass migration.

As of August, there were almost 18,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Morocco registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Morocco's parliament has yet to approve a 2013 draft law on the right to asylum. A 2003 migration law that criminalizes irregular entry into the country without providing exceptions for refugees and asylum seekers remains in effect.

The European Union continued to cooperate with Morocco on migration control despite human rights concerns.

## Western Sahara

In July, France recognized Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, a break with past policies and a shift in international acceptance of the 2007 Moroccan autonomy proposal, which would grant Morocco control over Western Sahara's national security and foreign affairs. France joined 37 other nations, four years after former president Donald Trump proclaimed US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange for the country's establishment of full diplomatic and economic ties with Israel. Algeria, a

steadfast supporter of Saharawi independence, withdrew its ambassador from France in protest, stating that the measure "flouts international legality" and "takes up the cause of the denial of the Saharawi people's right to self-determination."

Most of Western Sahara has been under Moroccan control since 1975. In 1991, both Morocco and the Polisario Front, a liberation movement that seeks self-determination for Western Sahara, agreed to a UN-brokered ceasefire in anticipation of a referendum on self-determination, yet Morocco has rejected holding a vote on self-determination that would include independence as an option.

In 2020, the Algeria-based Polisario Front announced an end to the ceasefire with Morocco and resumed its armed struggle. In May, it attempted to attack the Morocco-controlled city of Smara, but rockets fell short and caused no damage.

The UN Secretary-General, in his July report on Western Sahara, denounced Morocco's failure to give the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) access to visit Western Sahara since 2015. He said OHCHR "continued to receive allegations relating to human rights violations, including intimidation, surveillance and discrimination against Sahrawi individuals particularly when advocating for self-determination." Citing consistent concerns raised by the UN Secretary-General and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, a cross-regional group of countries appealed for independent monitoring and reporting on the human rights situation in Western Sahara.

The European Court of Justice in October confirmed the annulment of association agreements between the European Union and Morocco insofar as they include Western Sahara. This was in response to the appeals brought by the European Commission and Council against the court's 2021 ruling that Western Sahara is a distinct entity from Morocco, and the consent of its people is needed for agreements to apply to that territory. The ruling cancels trade deals that allowed Morocco to export fish and farm products to the EU from the Western Sahara region considering it in breach of their "right to self-determination."

Nineteen Sahrawi men remained in prison after they were convicted, in unfair trials in 2013 and 2017, of killing 11 Moroccan security force members in 2010, amid allegations of forced confessions and torture.

As of March, there were 173,600 Sahrawi refugees living in five camps near the southwestern Algerian town of Tindouf.

# Mozambique

The human rights environment in Mozambique did not improve in 2024. The humanitarian situation worsened due to massive displacement in conflict-hit Cabo Delgado province and a drought affecting Southern Africa. As of August, over 850,000 people were displaced within Mozambique due to the conflict and the impact of the climate crisis, according to the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR. Children's rights continued to be seriously hindered by the conflict in Cabo Delgado province. Police were implicated in widespread abuses against journalists, civil society activists, and election observers ahead of the October general elections. Authorities appeared to make some progress in the fight against kidnappings for ransom across the country.

## Humanitarian Situation in Conflict-hit Region

The humanitarian situation continued to worsen as the conflict in Cabo Delgado province and the severe drought affecting the Southern African region led to widespread displacement. The conflict continued to have a significant impact on public health services, particularly with the destruction of health facilities by armed groups, which severely impacted people's access to essential health care.

The warring parties in the conflict increased the use of explosive devices that killed civilians and security force personnel. In June, at least five people were killed in incidents linked to explosive devices in Cabo Delgado's Mocímboa da Praia district.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) ended in July. In the same month, a new wave of deadly attacks by the Islamic State (ISIS) linked group locally known as Al-Shabab or Mashababos, in Chiure, Macomia and Nangade districts, forced thousands of people to flee.

## Children's Rights

Children continued to be among the most affected by the conflict in Cabo Delgado province. The ISIS-linked armed group recruited boys as young as 13 and used them to raid and loot Macomia town in May. It is unclear if the children also engaged in fighting against government armed forces. Some of the children who escaped or were rescued faced

serious challenges with learning and stigma during efforts by the authorities to reintegrate them into society.

In July, more than 70 children went missing after a surge in attacks by the Mashababos armed groups, with authorities fearing that many of them had drowned in a river or were abducted by the militants.

Cases of child marriage increased significantly in Cabo Delgado province, according to the humanitarian organization Save The Children. The organization, in a report identified socio-economic challenges being the "key factors that lead families to subject girls to child marriage."

Mozambique's adolescent pregnancy rate is the highest in East and Southern Africa. In April, President Filipe Nyusi acknowledged that adolescent pregnancies and child marriage were two of the country's biggest challenges in the path to gender equality. Mozambique continued to have one of the lowest secondary school enrollment rates of girls across Southern Africa. Thousands of girls dropped out of school because they were pregnant or parenting and faced discrimination, stigma or lack of financial and social support to stay in school.

In Cabo Delgado and Nampula provinces, more than 100 schools closed due to insecurity, affecting the learning of over 50,000 children, according to UNICEF.

## Election-Related Violence

Police officers were implicated in widespread abuses against journalists and civil society activists, seriously affecting their work ahead of the October 9 elections. The authorities rarely investigated complaints of harassment, threats, physical assault, and arbitrary arrest and detention that targeted journalists, activists, and others covering election-related activities.

Police used tear gas, on October 21 to disperse people during a protest against election irregularities and the killing of two prominent opposition members, in Maputo. Opposition lawyer Elvino Dias and party official Paulo Guambe were travelling by car, on October 29, in Maputo city, when gunmen followed the car and fired several times at them.

In August, the spokesman of the Election Commission accused the Mozambican police of being responsible for violence during campaigns, and the judicial system of "promoting impunity."

During the campaign, security forces reportedly detained and harrassed local election observers. On at least one occasion, members of the riot police detained an observer in Cabo Delgado province, accusing him of being a "terrorist."

Unidentified people and alleged members of the ruling party reportedly intimidated, harassed, and destroyed property of opposition supporters during election campaigns. Despite the insecurity in some areas of Cabo Delgado province, the election commission said that it had created conditions to ensure voting would take place in all the districts of the province.

In October, following disputed elections, international observers including from the African Union, European Union and the Commonwealth expressed concern about the credibility of the process and called for an investigation into claims of election irregularities.

## Unresolved Kidnappings

Authorities appeared to make some progress in the fight against kidnappings for ransom across the country.

In August, police detained five South African nationals in connection with kidnappings of Mozambicans. In the same month, the National Criminal Investigation Service (SERNIC) revealed that it had identified three Mozambicans resident in neighboring South Africa as the masterminds of the kidnappings of businesspeople. Earlier, President Nyusi had called on the police to step up their efforts and arrest "at least one mastermind" of kidnappings to regain public trust.

More than 100 businesspeople have reportedly abandoned Mozambique, due to fear and insecurity caused by the wave of kidnappings across the country.

In May, the United Kingdom warned its citizens visiting Mozambique of the risk of kidnapping, noting that “while most victims are Mozambican, foreign nationals may also be targeted."  In July, Portugal’s ambassador to Mozambique called on the Mozambican government to end the wave of kidnappings as it was harming foreign investment in the country.

# Myanmar

The Myanmar junta has ramped up its “scorched earth” tactics against civilians in response to the growing armed resistance and territorial losses. The military’s atrocities committed since the February 2021 coup amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, fueled by decades of impunity. Ethnic Rohingya are currently facing the gravest threats since the military’s 2017 atrocities. Refugees from the conflict are increasingly fleeing to neighboring countries and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

## Military Abuses

Since October 2023, fighting between junta forces and alliances of ethnic and resistance armed groups escalated throughout the country, following the opposition’s launch of Operation 1027. The junta has increasingly carried out aerial and artillery attacks during military operations, including indiscriminate and deliberate strikes against civilians and civilian property and infrastructure. Fighting took place in all 14 states and regions. Civilians in conflict-affected areas have described living in constant fear of fighting, arrest, and torture by security forces.

The military has launched airstrikes on schools, hospitals, religious sites, and camps for displaced people. On January 7, a military airstrike on Kanan village in Sagaing Region killed 17 civilians who were attending church, including nine children. On February 5, the military launched an airstrike on a school in Daw Se Ei village in Karenni State, killing four students and injuring another 27 civilians. Overall, there have been growing numbers of attacks on education and grave violations against children. On September 5, the military bombed an internally displaced persons’ camp in Pekon township on the Shan-Karenni State border, killing eight children and two women.

The junta has carried out widespread extrajudicial killings. On May 29, soldiers rounded up hundreds of villagers in Byain Phyu in central Rakhine State and separated the men and women. Residents were interrogated and tortured; some were shot. The military reportedly killed between 48 and 76 villagers, including five women who were also raped. In August, two journalists were killed during a military raid in Mon State.

Since 2022, Myanmar has used domestically produced air-dropped cluster munitions, which are indiscriminate weapons in populated areas. In 2024, airstrikes involving cluster bombs were seemingly carried out in Rakhine State in January; Chin State in April; and in Mandalay Region in August.

Myanmar topped the global list of landmine casualties for the first time in 2023. In the first nine months of 2024, 889 civilian casualties from landmines and explosive remnants of war were documented, including 245 children, though the actual numbers are presumed much higher. Myanmar is one of only four countries currently using antipersonnel mines.

From May 2021 to August 2024, the military burned more than 100,000 homes, predominantly in Sagaing Region.

The junta continues to receive foreign revenue and make payments for weapons and other military needs by evading sanctions.

## Conscription, Repression, and Surveillance

On February 10, facing depleted ranks in the military, the junta activated the 2010 People's Military Service Law, enabling the conscription of men ages 18 to 35 and women ages 18 to 27 for up to five years. Myanmar's military has a long history of employing abusive recruitment tactics. Rates of arrests and of people fleeing the country both increased in response. Military authorities have since used abductions and detention of family members to carry out conscription, including of children. Conscripts have been used as human shields and porters on the front lines. In August, the junta announced it would recruit men ages 35 to 65 to join the newly developed "people's security and counterterrorism teams." The UN verified the military's recruitment and use of over 1,100 children in 2023.

In July, the junta extended its "state of emergency" for an additional six months to prepare for the sham elections scheduled for November 2025. In October, the junta launched a nationwide census with an extensive list of 68 questions that appear designed to root out opposition activists and eligible military recruits. In a similar surveillance effort, the junta in May began requiring all individuals to obtain biometric e-IDs in order to leave the country.

The junta severely restricts internet and phone services, with rolling shutdowns around the country—particularly in conflict areas—that gravely impact access to information, humanitarian efforts, and community protection. In May, the junta Ministry of Transport and Communications began blocking VPNs (virtual private networks), which allow users to access the internet securely and circumvent censorship, followed by a block on the encrypted message application Signal in July.

## Arbitrary Detention, Torture, and Ill-Treatment

Junta authorities have arrested at least 27,500 people since the 2021 coup, including over 5,700 women and 570 children. More than 1,900 people have died while in junta custody, although the actual figures are likely higher. The use of torture, sexual violence, and other ill-treatment is rampant in prisons, interrogation centers, military bases, and other detention sites, with reports of rape, beatings, prolonged stress positions, electrocution and burning, and deprivation of food, water, and sleep.

Junta forces have arbitrarily arrested activists, journalists, humanitarian workers, lawyers, and religious leaders. Charges under the amended counterterrorism law for association with anti-military groups have increased, including for support such as aid provision. On January 10, a closed military court sentenced award-winning documentary filmmaker Shin Daewe to life in prison on trumped-up terrorism charges. More than 1,800 people have been detained since February 2022 for online activity supporting the opposition or criticizing the military, including simply "liking" a post on social media. Security forces continue to arbitrarily detain family and friends of activists as a form of coercion and collective punishment, including children.

More than 125 detainees have been sentenced to death, with an additional 44 people sentenced to death in absentia.

The country's already weak rule of law has collapsed since the coup. Martial law has been declared in at least 64 townships. Lawyers defending anti-coup protesters and critics have faced threats, arrest, and prosecution. Military authorities have imposed systematic obstacles and restrictions on lawyers and abolished all semblance of an independent judiciary. The junta has established special closed courts inside prisons to fast-track

politically sensitive cases, while closed military tribunals operating in townships under martial law are entirely opaque.

## Persecution of Rohingya

About 630,000 Rohingya remain in Rakhine State, subject to systematic abuses that amount to the crimes against humanity of apartheid, persecution, and deprivation of liberty, including about 150,000 held in open-air detention camps.

Rohingya have been caught between the junta and ethnic Arakan Army forces since hostilities resumed in November 2023, ending a year-long unofficial ceasefire. As the Arakan Army has rapidly expanded its control of Rakhine State, the military has responded with indiscriminate attacks on civilians using helicopter gunships, artillery, and ground assaults. After junta forces and allied Rohingya armed groups attacked Rakhine areas in mid-April, the Arakan Army responded with a month of attacks on Rohingya villages. On May 17, Arakan Army forces shelled, looted, and burned Rohingya neighborhoods during their capture of Buthidaung town.

On August 5, approximately 180 people were reportedly killed following drone strikes and shelling on civilians fleeing fighting in Maungdaw town.

Since February, the junta has recruited in violation of domestic law thousands of Rohingya men and boys from Rakhine State and the refugee camps in Bangladesh, with support from Rohingya armed groups, inflaming tensions between the Rohingya Muslim and Rakhine Buddhist communities.

The junta has imposed new movement restrictions and aid blockages in Rakhine State.

The conflict has internally displaced more than 380,000 people in Rakhine State and southern Chin State since November 2023. Tens of thousands have fled across the border into Bangladesh, while thousands more have been pushed back by Bangladesh border guards.

Since January 2023, more than 11,000 Rohingya have attempted dangerous boat journeys from Myanmar and Bangladesh, over 800 of whom have died or gone missing.

## Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Women and girls are increasingly at risk of sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence, committed by military and non-state perpetrators with impunity, particularly amid the expanding conflict.

As a means of punishing the civilian population, military forces have subjected civilians to rape and gang rape, sexualized torture and mutilation, sexual assault at checkpoints or during raids, and forced nudity. The notorious "ogre column" military unit in Sagaing Region has abducted, beheaded, maimed, and raped women.

Sexual and gender-based violence is a frequent tool of torture used against detainees, including rape with objects, burning of genitals, sexual humiliation, and invasive body searches.

Domestic violence has increased sharply, while survivors have little to no access to services, protection, or redress.

## Aid Blockages and Displacement

The junta has ramped up its deadly blockages of humanitarian aid as a method of collective punishment against the civilian population. These blockages sustain the military's longstanding "four cuts" strategy, designed to maintain control of an area by isolating and terrorizing civilians. From January to June, humanitarian organizations reported 682 incidents impeding the delivery of aid.

More than 3.2 million people have been internally displaced since the coup, including over 1.8 million since the escalation of fighting in October 2023. The majority live in makeshift shelters and open fields with limited access to food, health care, and water.

In September, hundreds were killed and an estimated 1 million affected by flooding from monsoon rains and Typhoon Yagi. The emergency response was obstructed by the junta's restrictions on aid, including roadblocks, telecommunications suspensions, denial of travel authorizations, blocked mobile payments, and increased scrutiny at checkpoints, particularly in resistance strongholds. Junta officials reportedly blocked the transport of food and other aid materials in Bago Region and Karenni and Shan States.

Prior to the flooding, the number of people needing humanitarian assistance had already grown to 18.6 million, including 6 million children, amid countrywide economic and infrastructure collapse.

Lack of access to medical care has exacerbated growing malnutrition, waterborne illness, and preventable deaths. Since early 2024, an estimated 1.6 million people have been cut off from hospital access in Rakhine State, where Médecins Sans Frontières was forced to suspend its medical activities. In response to a cholera outbreak in Yangon Region beginning in June, the junta withheld health information from the public and the World Health Organization (WHO).

## Justice and Accountability

In November, the International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor requested an arrest warrant for the commander-in-chief, Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, for the alleged crimes against humanity of deportation and persecution of the Rohingya committed between August and December 2017. The court's investigation is limited to crimes committed at least in part in Bangladesh, an ICC member country.

In July, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) accepted the interventions of seven governments in Gambia's case against Myanmar under the Genocide Convention. Gambia filed its reply to Myanmar's counter-memorial in May. The military's escalating abuses in Rakhine State underscore its blatant disregard for the binding provisional measures ordered by the ICJ.

In June, an Argentine prosecutor requested arrest warrants for 25 individuals from Myanmar. The case was brought under the principle of universal jurisdiction.

# Nepal

Nepal saw two changes of government in 2024, first in March when Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who is chairman of the Maoist Party, Nepal's third largest, exchanged the Nepali Congress party for the Unified Marxist Leninist party (UML) as his principal coalition partner. In July, the Congress and UML then reached an agreement to form a coalition together, replacing Dahal as prime minister with UML chairman K.P. Oli.

Nepal's long-awaited transitional justice law, which parliament adopted in August, incorporates positive provisions that could help advance truth seeking, justice, and reparations for the widespread human rights violations committed during the 1996-2006 conflict between government forces and Maoist rebels. However, some of its elements could undermine accountability for serious crimes.

The lack of justice for conflict-era crimes has contributed to a widespread crisis of impunity in Nepal, undermining human rights, governance, and the rule of law. Police officers accused of recent rights violations were not held accountable, while investigations of corruption allegations were met with political interference.

Around 40 percent of Nepal's population is under 18, but only around 4 percent of the government's social security budget is targeted at children. Nepal's Child Grant, a proven social security program, currently benefits only a minority of children aged under five. Despite the policy's success and popularity, where it is available, this human right was not extended in the 2024 budget.

Nepal is widely recognized for progressive court rulings to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. However, a 2023 court order requiring the government to register same-sex marriages is still not fully implemented, and another key ruling in July 2024 – that a person should be allowed to change their gender on the basis of self-identification – also only promises narrow impact.

## Child Rights

Child marriage remains a serious problem, with 33 percent of girls and 9 percent of boys married before age 18.

The Child Grant, also known as the child nutrition grant, currently involves monthly payments to families with children under the age of five in 25 out of Nepal's 77 districts, and all Dalit children under five nationwide. It has been endorsed by numerous Nepali civil society organizations and international policy experts including at UNICEF, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the European Union. However, successive governments have not followed through on commitments to make it universally available.

Studies underscore the transformative impact of the Child Grant, including increased birth registration rates, improved access to food and clothes, and a drop in the number of children forced into labor. Research also shows that the program enhances public perceptions of the government.

Nepal became a pioneer of social security in South Asia by introducing a universal old age allowance in the 1990s. Investing in social security for children is key to ensuring Nepal's future prosperity. Nepal's Constitution guarantees social and economic rights, including the right to social security for all children, and the Children's Act of 2018 provides further guarantees.

## Justice and Accountability

Many survivors and families of victims of conflict era violations and abuses have lived in hardship for years, often suffering mental and physical injuries, in desperate need of redress. The new Disappeared Persons' Enquiry, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amendment Act, (commonly known as the transitional justice law) seeks to address shortcomings in previous legislation struck down by the Supreme Court in 2015, including because its amnesty provisions violated Nepali and international legal standards. The new law includes several positive provisions, but some sections again appear designed to shield some perpetrators from prosecution.

Under the law, crimes committed during the conflict are either classified as “violations of human rights” or “serious violations of human rights.” While offenses defined as human rights violations can be granted amnesty, “serious violations of human rights” can be referred to and prosecuted in a special court. These definitions are not consistent with Nepali or international law and could exclude some serious crimes, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, which should not be subject to amnesty. This would violate victims’ right to effective remedy and reparation.

The law also requires that both categories of violations are committed “in a targeted or planned manner against an unarmed individual or community.” This could exclude many cases not only from criminal accountability but also other measures such as reparations. A provision allowing the attorney general to make a request for a 75 percent reduction in sentencing amounts to a disguised amnesty.

The law is vague on many points. All institutions involved in the administration of justice should construe it in accordance with international law and Nepal’s Constitution. Donors and the Nepali authorities should develop and implement a system for the management of funds to support the transitional justice process that upholds standards and safeguards against political and other unwarranted interference.

## Migrant Workers

Migrant workers are a mainstay of the Nepali economy, contributing around 27 per cent of GDP. Workers often take out informal loans at exorbitant interest rates to pay recruitment fees, and experience abuses by foreign employers and domestic recruitment agents that include wage theft, contract violations, sexual violence, and death and chronic illness linked to unsafe working conditions.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Nepal continues to make progress on LGBT rights, though comprehensive policy reform is needed. Same-sex marriages can be registered in principle, following an interim order from the Supreme Court. Local officials and lower courts have refused to register same-sex marriages in some cases, although appeals have been successful.

In principle, transgender people in Nepal can change their legal gender through a self-declaration process, but the gender markers are limited to a third, "other," category. In the absence of an official protocol, transgender people often face demands for medical verification. The Supreme Court ruled in August that Rukshana Kapali, a transgender woman law student, should be legally recognized as a woman without medical verification. The ruling only applies to Kapali, but sets an important precedent for others.

# Nicaragua

President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, intensified repression. They have expanded the use of forced exile and citizenship revocation as ways to target critics. The government also continued to arbitrarily shut down non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and universities in large numbers, and to engage in other systematic methods of censorship and persecution against critics and opponents.

## Concentration of Power

In November, Ortega proposed a constitutional overhaul that would expand presidential powers and limit fundamental rights. The changes would establish a "co-presidency" with Murillo, and empower them to "coordinate" other branches of power. It also appears designed to provide legal cover to many of the government's systematic human rights violations, such as depriving so-called "traitors" of their Nicaraguan nationality and censoring the press. The Assembly must approve the reform in two consecutive sessions, with the final vote expected in January's new term.

## Expulsion and Deprivation of Nationality

In September, the government expelled 135 political prisoners to Guatemala, stripping them of nationality and confiscating their assets, violating international law. Another 46 political opponents remained imprisoned, including some Indigenous leaders. Over 450 people have been deprived of Nicaraguan nationality since February 2023, and many have been left stateless.

In September, the National Assembly, controlled by the ruling party, amended the Criminal Code to be able to prosecute in absentia people who are abroad but are accused of committing certain crimes in Nicaragua—a law that could open the door to targeting critics in exile, including those the government has expelled. The assembly also expanded judges' powers to seize assets from defendants and established criminal penalties for "anyone who promotes, requests, or facilitates economic, commercial, or financial sanctions against Nicaragua's institutions or government officials."

## Freedom of Religion

The government has intensified its campaign against religious institutions, especially the Catholic Church. Since October 2023, Nicaragua has forced over 200 religious figures into exile, deported them, or barred their return to the country.

In August, the government expelled seven Catholic priests, after arbitrarily detaining them for several days at a seminary. In January, the government expelled 19 Catholic clergy members, sending them to the Vatican, including Bishop Rolando Álvarez, an outspoken government critic, who had been arbitrarily detained since August 2022 and sentenced to 26 years in prison without due process. In total, authorities have detained and subsequently expelled 46 priests and bishops since 2018.

Since 2023, repression has expanded to include protestant and evangelical groups. In August, authorities released and expelled 11 pastors of an evangelical church who had been imprisoned since December 2023.

## Freedoms of Expression and Association

Human rights defenders, journalists, and critics are targets of death threats, assaults, intimidation, harassment, surveillance, online defamation campaigns, arbitrary detention, prosecution, deprivation of nationality, expulsion and denial of entry to Nicaragua.

The government has shut down over 5,600 NGOs, including 1,500 closed in a single day in August. These represent roughly 80 percent of NGOs that operated in Nicaragua, according to the latest available figures from 2018.

The government has also closed at least 58 media outlets since 2018, the Nicaraguan Platform of NGO Networks reported. Abusive legislation enabled many of the closures.

Between January and June, 26 journalists fled the country, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) reported, bringing the total number of media workers who have fled Nicaragua since 2018 to 263.

## Indigenous Peoples' Rights

Indigenous and Afro-descendant leaders face defamation campaigns, surveillance, harassment, arbitrary detention, politically motivated prosecutions, and entry bans to Nicaragua. In October 2023, the Supreme Electoral Council stripped the Indigenous political party YATAMA of its legal status.

In September 2023, the police detained two of YATAMA's main leaders, Brooklyn Rivera and Nancy Henríquez. In December of that year, a court sentenced Henríquez to eight years in prison for "undermining national integrity" and "spreading fake news." She appears to be imprisoned in "La Esperanza" prison; Rivera's whereabouts remained unknown to his family and acquaintances at time of writing.

Indigenous and Afro-descendant leaders and organizations face repression amid escalating armed settler violence and encroachment on communal lands in the Autonomous Regions. The United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua, established by the UN Human Rights Council in 2022, documented 67 violent incidents against Indigenous Peoples in Miskitu and Mayangna territories from April 2018 to March 2024, including murder, injury, sexual violence, and kidnappings.

In March, the UN Green Climate Fund (GCF) terminated funding for Bio-CLIMA, an environmental project aimed at reducing deforestation in key biospheres. The Fund cited policy non-compliance and lack of proper consent from Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.

## Access to Abortion

Nicaragua has, since 2006, prohibited abortion under all circumstances. Those who have abortions face prison sentences of up to two years and medical professionals who perform them face up to six years. The ban forces women and girls to continue unwanted pregnancies, putting their health and lives at risk.

## Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants

As of July, there were 345,800 Nicaraguan asylum seekers abroad, often in Costa Rica, the United States, Panama, Spain, and Mexico. Some 30,000 others were recognized as refugees.

Nicaragua has become a major transit point for migrants and asylum seekers heading to the US. Since 2021, Nicaragua has operated a continuous migrant air bridge, expanding to intercontinental routes. According to media reports, from May 2023 to May 2024, Managua's airport received charter flights with over 190,000 passengers, primarily from Caribbean nations. The government has profited from this influx, charging people fees to allow entry.

## Justice and Accountability

The UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua has found reasonable grounds to believe that the authorities have committed crimes against humanity, including murder, imprisonment, torture, sexual violence, forced deportation, and persecution on political grounds. The group's current mandate is up for renewal in March 2025.

In October 2022, an Argentine prosecutor opened a criminal investigation, for alleged crimes against humanity, into Ortega and Murillo under the principle of universal jurisdiction, which allows national courts to prosecute individuals for serious international crimes regardless of where they occurred or the nationalities of those involved.

No international rights monitoring bodies have been allowed to enter Nicaragua since 2018.

## Sanctions and Financing of Repression

In May, the US Department of State imposed visa restrictions on more than 250 members of the Nicaraguan government and non-government actors for their roles in supporting "attacks on human rights and fundamental freedoms, repression of civil society organizations, and profiting off of vulnerable migrants." Since November 2021, the US Department of State has imposed visa restrictions on more than 1,400 Nicaraguan officials involved in human rights violations, and corrupt practices.

Also in May, the US Treasury Department imposed sanctions on three Nicaragua-based entities for their corruption or role in the Nicaraguan government's repression of the Nicaraguan people. As of September, the US Treasury Department had imposed asset-blocking sanctions on 14 entities and 47 people, including members of the government, legislature, and judiciary.

In November 2023, the US State Department launched a new visa restriction policy "targeting individuals running charter flights into Nicaragua designed primarily for irregular migrants." In June, the State Department imposed visa restrictions on an executive of a charter flight transportation company for "facilitating irregular migration to the United States via Nicaragua from outside the Western Hemisphere."

The EU renewed sanctions on 21 individuals and 3 state-linked entities in October. The United Kingdom and Canada have respectively sanctioned 14 and 35 individuals implicated in human rights violations.

The Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) provided US$2.65 billion in loans to Nicaragua between 2018 and 2022, including funding for police infrastructure, despite widespread documentation of human rights abuses by the Nicaraguan government during this period. CABEI's president, Gisela Sánchez, who took office in December 2023, said the bank is reviewing all loans approved over the past 10 years.

# Niger

The military authorities in Niger have cracked down on media, peaceful dissent, and the political opposition since taking power in a coup in July 2023. They have arbitrarily detained former President Mohamed Bazoum and his wife, dozens of officials from the ousted government, and people close to Bazoum, as well as several journalists. They have also rejected public oversight of military spending.

Niger continues to battle Islamist armed groups, including the Islamic State in the Sahel Province (ISSP) and the rival Al-Qaeda-linked Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen, JNIM), as well as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in its western and southeastern regions.

In response to the coup, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed sanctions on the country and the coup leaders in August 2023, including travel bans and asset freezes. ECOWAS lifted the sanctions in February.

In August 2023, Niger's current leader, Gen. Abdourahamane Tiani announced a three-year transition to democratic rule, but no date for presidential elections has been fixed.

On January 28, the junta announced it would leave ECOWAS, along with Mali and Burkina Faso, a move that would limit opportunities for its citizens to seek justice for human rights violations through the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice.

On July 7, the military leaders of Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali signed a treaty establishing the Confederation of the Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES), taking the Alliance of Sahel States, a mutual defense pact created in September 2023, a step further, and ruling out any possibility of returning to ECOWAS.

## Post-Coup Crackdown on Opposition and Dissent

Since the coup, Bazoum and his wife have been detained at the presidential palace in Niamey, the capital. In December 2023, the ECOWAS Court ruled that Bazoum was arbitrarily detained and called for his release. In April, the authorities initiated legal

proceedings against Bazoum to lift his presidential immunity so he could be prosecuted for alleged crimes committed after he was elected president in 2021. On June 14, Niger's state court lifted the immunity following a proceeding that failed to meet basic due process and international fair trial standards, including the right to a defense.

Since the coup, the junta arbitrarily arrested at least 30 officials from the ousted government, including former ministers, members of the presidential cabinet, and people close to Bazoum, failing to provide them due process and fair trial rights. At least four of the officials were granted bail in April, while all others were charged with "threatening state security," among other offenses, before a military court, despite being civilians.

On May 29, the justice and human rights minister issued a circular suspending all visits by human rights organizations to Nigerien prisons "until further notice," in violation of national and international human rights law, including the Convention against Torture and its Optional Protocol, to which Niger is a party.

## Post-Coup Crackdown on Freedom of Expression

Since the 2023 coup, media freedom has been severely restricted. The authorities have threatened, harassed, and arbitrarily arrested journalists, many of whom said they are self-censoring amid fear of reprisals.

On January 29, the interior minister issued a decree suspending the activities of *Maison de la Presse*, an independent media organization, and announcing the creation of a new management committee for the media organization headed by the Interior Ministry's secretary general.

In April, security forces arrested journalist Ousmane Toudou. In the days following the July 2023 coup, Toudou denounced the military takeover through a widely shared social media post. In May 2024, he was charged with "plotting against state security" and sent to pretrial detention.

In April, security forces arrested Soumana Maiga, editor of *L'Enquêteur*, after the newspaper reported a story published by a French newspaper on the alleged installation of listening equipment by Russian agents in state buildings. He was brought before a judge in

May, detained on a charge of infringement of national defense, and released pending trial on July 9.

Tchima Illa Issoufou, the Hausa language BBC radio correspondent in Niger, was threatened by members of the security forces who accused her of attempting to "destabilize Niger" because of her reporting on the security situation in the Tillabéri region, in western Niger, where Islamist armed groups have carried out attacks against both civilians and security forces. In May, Issoufou was forced to flee the country. On April 26, security forces arrested Ali Tera, a civil society activist whom Issoufou had interviewed.

On June 12, the justice minister announced that a 2019 cybercrime law had been amended. The law, which criminalized the "dissemination, production, and making available to others of data that may disturb public order," was the basis of a crackdown on human rights in 2020, including the right to freedom of expression online. In 2022, the Bazoum government amended the law, replacing prison sentences with fines for defamation-related crimes. The June 12 amendments, however, reinstate prison sentences.

## Backsliding on the Fight Against Corruption

On February 23, Tiani, who vowed to fight corruption after taking power, signed an order repealing any control on military spending. The order states that "expenditure for the acquisition of equipment or materials or any other supplies, the performance of works or services for the defense and security forces … shall be excluded from the scope of the legislation on public procurement and public accounting." Transparency in military budgeting and expenditure is crucial to addressing corruption and mismanagement and contributes to respect for human rights and the rule of law and government accountability.

## Attacks by Islamist and Other Armed Groups

An Islamist insurgency, which broke out in northern Mali in 2012 before spreading to neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso in 2015, has resulted in widespread abuses in Niger for more than a decade. The so-called "three borders area," in southwest Niger's Tillabéri region, between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, has regularly suffered attacks by armed groups linked to the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. The ISSP has imposed strict Sharia (Islamic law) in Tillabéri region, enforcing severe gender discriminatory rules, hindering the

livelihoods of women and girls, limiting their participation in civic life, and exposing girls to child marriage.

Media reported that on January 6, Nigerien military drone strikes against Islamist armed groups killed several civilians in Tiawa village, Tillabéri region. The following day, the junta released a statement acknowledging civilian casualties, but did not provide any death toll.

Niger's defense minister said that, on June 25, a "coalition of armed groups" killed twenty soldiers and one civilian in an attack on Tassia village, Tillabéri region.

On July 11, some 200 prisoners, including suspected Islamist fighters, escaped from a high security prison in Koutoukalé, Tillabéri region. Officials ordered heightened vigilance and launched search operations.

A series of attacks on the pipeline carrying crude oil from Niger to Benin were reported in 2024. Ethnic-Toubou rebels from the Patriotic Liberation Front (Front patriotique de libération), which is fighting for the release of Bazoum, claimed at least two attacks, including one on June 16 in Tesker that partially destroyed the pipeline.

## New Terrorism Database

On August 27, President Tiani signed Order No. 2024-43, establishing "an automated data processing file containing personal data of people, groups of people, or entities involved in acts of terrorism." The ordinance sets out overly broad criteria for inclusion in the database, deprives those listed of due process and an adequate redress mechanism, and puts privacy rights at risk.

On October 10, Tiani signed a decree, based on an earlier order establishing the terrorism database, provisionally canceling the Nigerien nationality of nine people linked to Bazoum, raising rights concerns. By losing their nationality, individuals could be deprived of legal and social protections abroad and prevented from returning to Niger.

# Nigeria

Following the 2023 election of former Lagos State Governor Bola Ahmed Tinubu as president, 2024 was marked by increased economic hardship, threats to freedom of expression, and ongoing insecurity. Economic reforms introduced in 2023 contributed to inflation which surged to 34.19 percent by June, with food inflation exceeding 40 percent, pushing many deeper into poverty. In response to criticism, authorities resorted to repression, arresting and prosecuting journalists, social media commentators, and protesters.

## Violence in the Northwest and Northcentral Regions

Killings, kidnappings, and violent raids by so-called bandit gangs, which emerged following years of farmer-herder conflict, continue to plague Nigeria's Northwest region. In March alone, nearly 400 people were reportedly kidnapped in Kaduna State, including 287 schoolchildren, many of them girls, at the government secondary school in Kuriga town. Authorities later announced the rescue of 137 children, claiming this accounted for all the schoolchildren kidnapped, rejecting the initial report of 287 kidnapped students as erroneous. Also in March, bandits kidnapped at least 15 students from a boarding school in Gidan Bakuso village, Sokoto State, while they were sleeping.

Violence between predominately Muslim herders and predominantly Christian farming communities persisted in the Northcentral region. A deadly Christmas Day assault in December 2023, attributed to a group of herders, resulted in the deaths of about 140 people across various communities in Plateau State, leading to a series of clashes and attacks in the state. In January, at least 30 people were killed and more than 100 were injured in attacks allegedly carried out by herders on villages in Mangu Local Government Area, Plateau State. By February, 865 people were reportedly killed and over 15,000 were displaced to areas in Plateau and Bauchi states, as tensions continued to rise.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), over 1.3 million people were internally displaced in the Northcentral and Northwest regions by April 2024, up from nearly 1.1 million in December 2023.

## Separatist Agitations in the Southeast Region

In May, gunmen killed eleven people, including six civilians and five soldiers, in an attack in Obingwa Local Government Area, Abia State. Although no group claimed responsibility for the attack, the government said the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a secessionist group in the Southeast region, was responsible.

The trial of Nnamdi Kanu, IPOB's leader, on terrorism and treason charges, resumed in February after the Supreme court overturned a decision by the Court of Appeal to dismiss the charges against him. Kanu was first arrested in 2015, fled Nigeria in 2017 while on bail, and was arrested again in 2021 in Kenya. On September 24, the case suffered another setback after the presiding judge recused herself following a request by Kanu, who accused her of bias.

## Boko Haram Conflict in the Northeast Region

In February, suspected Boko Haram fighters abducted over 200 internally displaced people, mostly children, in the Ngala Local Government Area of Borno State. In September, in one of the deadliest attacks in the region in recent years, fighters killed at least 170 people, mostly men and boys, in Mafa village, Yobe State. ISWAP, a prominent breakout faction of Boko Haram, is suspected of having carried out the reprisal attack following the community's refusal to continue paying levies to them.

In April, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which comprises of military units from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria started the second phase of the "Lake Sanity" operation, which they reported led to the killing of at least 140 Boko Haram fighters, and to the arrest of 57 individuals implicated in extremist activities. The operation was launched in 2022 to fight back against Boko Haram's insurgency in the Lake Chad basin.

April marked the 10th anniversary of the abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Borno State, 90 of whom remain in captivity.

## Poverty and Inequality

The government did little to cushion people from the impacts of economic reforms introduced in 2023. These reforms, including the removal of a fuel consumption subsidy

and the liberalization of foreign currency exchange rates, contributed to high inflation, resulting in Nigeria's worst cost of living crisis in 30 years.

In February, the government resumed a cash transfer program to support families after it was suspended due to irregularities. The program was initiated in October 2023 and aimed to ultimately benefit 15 million families by distributing 25,000 naira (US$15) to each beneficiary over a period of three months, from October to December 2023, but had only benefited 1.7 million people by December 2023.

Meanwhile, the government's spending priorities in 2024, including the purchase of a presidential jet unveiled in August sparked public outrage.

## Abuses by Security Forces

Authorities responded to nationwide protests in August against the economic crisis, tagged #EndBadGovernance, with violence in some locations, including Abuja, Gombe, and Kano. Several protesters were reportedly killed over the 10 days of the protests, and scores more were arrested.

Government officials and security agencies warned people ahead of the protests against participating, claiming the protests were politically motivated, intended to undermine the government and create conditions for "regime change." In early September, Nigerian authorities charged 10 protesters with treason, which carries the possibility of the death penalty. In November,76 protesters, including 30 minors, detained since August, were also charged with treason and inciting a coup. Outrage over images of the children in court led President Tinubu to order their release and the dropping of charges.

## Accountability for Abuses by Security Forces

In March, the Special Independent Investigative Panel on Human Rights Violations in Counter-Insurgency Operations in the Northeast concluded hearings on allegations of forced abortions and infanticide against the military but has not yet issued its report.

In May, the Nigerian military announced that two officers would face a court martial for a December 2023 airstrike in Tundun Biri Community, Kaduna State, which killed 85 and

injured many more. However, military authorities provided no details on the investigation or indictment related to the strike, which was intended for bandits.

In September, a military airstrike in Kaduna State, Nigeria, killed 24 people. The Air Force announced an investigation into the strike, which was intended to target bandits but reportedly struck civilians.

## Freedom of Expression and Media

The authorities have intensified a crackdown on critics and journalists, marked by numerous instances of abductions, unlawful arrests, and detention.

In August, Isaac Bristol, a social commentator alleged to run an anonymous social commentary account on X, was reported missing, and was confirmed three weeks later to be in custody of the police. Bristol is also charged under provisions of the Cybercrimes Act including for disseminating false information intended to disrupt law and order, obtaining and sharing classified information, and money laundering.

In May, Daniel Ojukwu, a reporter at the Foundation for Investigative Journalism, a nongovernmental organization, went missing in Lagos and was discovered later to be in the custody of police, who accused him of violating the Cybercrimes Act after he published a report online alleging that a former senior assistant to the president stole from a government fund. He was released 10 days later without charge.

In the same month, Chioma Okoli, a private citizen, was charged with offences under the Cybercrimes Act after she posted a negative review of a tomato puree produced by Erisco Foods Limited, who petitioned the police. The case has continued to generate public outrage since September 2023 when she was first arrested.

In March, Segun Olatunji, the editor of First News site, was taken from his home in Lagos by a dozen armed men who identified themselves as military officers and released two weeks later without charge in Abuja. While in custody, he was questioned about criticisms and allegations of corruption against government officials in his publications.

Nigeria's Cybercrimes Act makes a broad range of online interactions a criminal offense. In February, the government amended the law, but the Committee to Protect Journalists and others contend that the amendments are not extensive enough to prevent the law from being used for censorship and intimidation.

Other actions by the authorities have raised significant concerns. In July, a federal legislator, Tajudeen Abass, introduced the Counter Subversion Bill, which he claimed was aimed at enhancing Nigeria's counterterrorism framework by addressing subversive activities. The bill, which was eventually withdrawn following public outcry, was reported to include several troubling and overly broad provisions, including fines and jail time for failing to recite the national anthem and for insulting leadership.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In June, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community in Nigeria faced backlash after a newspaper article falsely suggested that the country had legalized same-sex relationships through an agreement with the European Union (EU). Nigeria, along with other members of the Organization of African, Caribbean and Pacific States, signed the Samoa Agreement with the EU, which focuses on sustainable development, climate change, investment opportunities, and international collaboration.

Nigerian law criminalizes same-sex conduct, same-sex marriages, and the registration of LGBT organizations. Sentences include a maximum penalty of 14 years imprisonment. At the state level, same-sex sexual activities are criminalized through various laws, including Sharia law, with the maximum sentence being death by stoning.

## Women's and Girl's Rights

In August, a bill to repeal the 2015 Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act advanced for consideration by the Senate and sparked public outrage. The VAPP Act offers women and girls protection from abuse, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, domestic violence, rape, and female genital mutilation. Senator Jibrin Isah, who introduced the bill for the repeal and reenactment in 2022, claimed the bill will address several challenges in the current law, including gender bias.

The brutal killing of university student Christianah Idowu, 21, in August led to renewed calls for authorities to address the rising cases of femicide in Nigeria.

# North Korea

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) is one of the most repressive countries in the world. The 2014 UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) report found that North Korea committed widespread rights violations, constituting crimes against humanity. Under totalitarian leader Kim Jong Un, North Korea maintains fearful obedience through arbitrary punishments, torture, executions, unjust imprisonment, and forced labor. Sexual and domestic violence against women and girls is widespread and normalized. Basic freedoms, including expression, assembly, and access to information, are severely restricted. In 2024, North Korea maintained extreme and unnecessary measures under the pretext of Covid-19 protection.

## Freedom of Expression and Information

The government severely restricts freedom of expression and access to information. All media is strictly controlled. Accessing phones, computers, televisions, radios, or other unsanctioned media is illegal and considered "anti-socialist behavior." The government cracks down on those accessing unsanctioned content, particular of South Korean origin. It jams Chinese mobile phone services at the border, and arrests people for communicating with contacts outside the country.

In July, a man reportedly received a seven-year labor sentence for borrowing an SD card containing South Korean movies. The woman who lent the card received 15 years of forced labor. In August, media with contacts inside the country reported that North Korean athletes, who took selfies at the Paris Olympics that became viral online, faced intense scrutiny and possible punishment. This highlighted the government's ideological control even outside the country. In August, a court reportedly sentenced a woman and her parents to 10, 9 and 8 years of forced labor for receiving money from overseas and connecting people with relatives in South Korea. The sentencing took place at a public trial in Hoeryong, North Hamgyong province.

## Freedom of Movement

The government tightly restricts freedom of movement. Travel between provinces or abroad without prior approval is illegal in North Korea. Human Rights Watch confirmed that as of

September, border guards in the northern border were still ordered to "unconditionally shoot" anyone trying to leave without permission. This directive is based on a decree from August 2020, purportedly to protect people from Covid-19.

In February, North Korea opened its border to Russian tourists. In July, a delegation from the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) visited North Korea for the first time since the Covid-19 pandemic. In August, North Korea announced plans to open the country to international tourism in December. Some diplomats returned to North Korea in December 2023 and a German delegation visited in February, but humanitarian organizations and most diplomats remained unable to return.

Private, unofficial trade has almost completely ceased in recent years. In January, trade data reportedly showed that official trade with China in 2023 reached almost similar levels to those of pre-Covid-19 years.

The number of North Koreans able to flee remained low. The many obstacles to leaving included greater surveillance in China. Many North Koreans in China remained hidden in safe houses for years as the Chinese government sought to detain North Korean refugees and return them to North Korea. In April, China forcibly returned about 60 North Korea refugees. In 2019, over 1,000 North Koreans arrived in South Korea compared to 105 between January and June 2024. The majority of North Koreans who flee are women; they face trafficking and exploitation in China and dire abuses in detention, including sexual violence, if returned to North Korea.

## Right to Health

Reliable data about North Korea is largely unavailable. Still, a 2024 South Korean study estimated that North Korea's 2023 gross national income was roughly KRW1.6 million (around US$1,200) per person. This places it among the poorest countries worldwide. North Korea has profound and widening social and economic inequalities, exacerbated by the government's prioritization of military development over public welfare. Therefore, income-based poverty measures may not accurately reflect most people's lived experiences. Many people have little to no access to health care and face chronic food insecurity.

In March, Human Rights Watch reported that excessive, abusive, and unnecessary Covid-19-related restrictions between 2020 and 2023 blocked most sources of income for a large majority of the population. This reduced their ability to buy already-scarce goods, including food and medicine. The restrictions especially harmed women, who are often the main breadwinners of their households, undermining the rights to food and health.

In August, the FAO raised concerns over the possible negative impacts that recent heavy floods, which destroyed homes, bridges and other infrastructure, may have on food production. The same month, in Musan county, North Hamgyong province, workers at paramilitary forced labor brigades (*dolgyeokdae*), were mobilized for infrastructure-related work in flooded areas. They reportedly escaped from their duties because of hunger and lack of food.

In February, UNICEF reported that North Korea reactivated its immunization routines in 2023, but found clinics nationwide lack the medicine, supplies, and knowledge to treat children.

## At-Risk Groups

North Korea uses *songbun*, a socio-political classification system that groups people into different classes, based on their perceived political loyalty and that of their parents and ancestors to the ruling Kim family. It discriminates against those placed in the lower classes in employment, housing, and education.

## Forced Labor

The North Korean government systematically requires forced, uncompensated labor from much of its population to sustain its economy. The government's forced labor demands target women, children, state workers, detainees, and prisoners. The government justifies these practices as demonstrations of loyalty to the government, with severe punishment for non-compliance.

In July, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that forced labor in North Korea is deeply institutionalized. It said that people are "controlled

and exploited through an extensive and multi-layered system of forced labor," that serves the state's interests rather than the people's.

North Korea is one of seven UN member states that has not joined the International Labour Organization.

## Justice and Accountability

Despite years of international condemnation, accountability for grave human rights abuses in North Korea remains elusive. In 2024, the 10th anniversary of the landmark 2014 UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) report, international efforts to advance accountability gained renewed traction. In March, the UN special rapporteur on North Korea dedicated her report to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) to efforts made and measures still needed to advance accountability. In April 2024, with EU leadership, the HRC adopted a resolution requesting the OHCHR to publish a comprehensive report on North Korean human rights since 2014, and to take stock of the COI's recommendations. The resolution also increased the OHCHR's resources to focus on criminal accountability for North Korea's rights violations.

In March, Russia vetoed the renewal of the Security Council's Panel of Experts' mandate to monitor enforcement of UN sanctions. In response, civil society organizations, human rights advocates, and security experts called for the UN General Assembly to create a new body to report on human rights as well as proliferation-related issues in North Korea. In October, the US, Japan, and South Korea announced the formation of the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team, which will monitor the implementation of sanctions on North Korea.

In June, the Security Council held a public official meeting on the human rights situation in North Korea, focusing on forced labor and issues that enable its nuclear program.

# Pakistan

The government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, which took office after Pakistan's general elections in February 2024, continued the previous government's crackdown on free expression and civil society. Blasphemy-related violence against religious minorities, fostered in part by government persecution and discriminatory laws, intensified. Attacks by Islamist militants, targeting law enforcement officials and religious minorities, increased, killing dozens of people in 2024 and providing a pretext for Pakistani authorities to continue their campaign to oust Afghan refugees.

## Freedom of Expression and Attacks on Civil Society

The authorities' widespread clampdown on freedom of expression and association marred the February elections. Social media platforms such as X were intermittently blocked throughout the year. The government cracked down on opposition parties and the media, detaining hundreds of activists, some on charges of using violence, while journalists faced intimidation, harassment, and digital and physical surveillance for perceived criticism of the government. Government threats and attacks created a climate of fear among journalists and civil society groups, with many resorting to self-censorship.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least seven journalists were killed in Pakistan in 2024, some allegedly by militant groups. Others were the victims of apparent enforced disappearances, including Syed Farhad Ali Shah, who was abducted from his home in May. The authorities also detained journalists for their critical reporting. In February, Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency arrested digital journalist Asad Ali Toor for an alleged "campaign" against Supreme Court judges after Toor reported on the chief justice and Pakistan's military establishment.

In June, the Punjab provincial government enacted a vague and overbroad defamation law, widely criticized by media and human rights organizations as a threat to media freedom. The law, which applies to social media posts as well as conventional media outlets, allows claimants to initiate legal action "without proof of actual damage or loss," and mandates draconian punishments without access to independent tribunals and due process.

The authorities charged several politicians and journalists under Pakistan's overly broad colonial-era sedition law, and civilians were tried in military courts in violation of international law. NGOs reported intimidation, harassment, and surveillance of various groups by government authorities. The government used its Regulation of INGOs in Pakistan policy to impede the registration and functioning of international humanitarian and human rights groups.

## Freedom of Religion and Belief

The Pakistani authorities enforced blasphemy law provisions that have provided a pretext for violence against religious minorities and left them vulnerable to arbitrary arrest and prosecution. Mob and vigilante attacks on people for alleged “blasphemy” killed four people; the government failed to hold the perpetrators accountable.

In June, a mob lynched a 36-year-old man after accusing him of committing blasphemy. The local police failed to intervene to protect the man. In two separate incidents in Umerkot, Sindh and in Quetta in September, police fatally shot two men accused of blasphemy. In September, a court sentenced Shagufta Kiran, a Christian woman, to death for allegedly sharing “blasphemous” material in a WhatsApp group.

Members of the Ahmadiyya religious community continue to be a major target for prosecutions under blasphemy laws and specific anti-Ahmadi legislation. Militant groups and the Islamist political party Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP) accused Ahmadis of “posing as Muslims.” Pakistan’s penal code also treats “posing as Muslims” as a criminal offense. In June, a mob of around 150 people attacked an Ahmadiyya place of worship in Kotli district and ransacked and damaged the building.

## Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Law Enforcement Abuses

Militant groups including Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Islamic State of Khorasan Province, Al-Qaeda, the Balochistan Liberation Army and their affiliates carried out suicide bombings and other attacks against security personnel that killed at least 757 people and caused hundreds of injuries, mostly to civilians, during the year. In August, the Balochistan Liberation Army killed at least 74 people in coordinated attacks targeting police stations, railway lines and highways across Balochistan province.

Pakistan law enforcement agencies were responsible for grave human rights violations, including detention without charge and extrajudicial killings. In July, the authorities detained hundreds of people in response to the Baloch National Gathering, a march seeking to raise awareness of human rights concerns in Balochistan. Some protesters reportedly attacked security forces, killing one soldier and injuring others. Baloch activists have alleged that government security forces used excessive force to prevent protesters from reaching the port city of Gwadar, the end point of the march. Government authorities imposed an internet shutdown on Gwadar in July.

In December a military court sentenced 60 civilians from 2 to 10 years in prison on charges of attacking military installations and offices following the arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan in May 2023. The military courts held secret proceedings and otherwise denied defendants' due process. The government said these defendants will have the right to appeal to the civilian high courts and Supreme Court.

## Abuses Against Refugees

Government officials blamed Afghan refugees in Pakistan for the surge in attacks by militant groups, providing a pretext for an ongoing effort by the authorities to coerce Afghans — some of whom have lived in Pakistan for generations — to leave. Undocumented Afghans remained particularly vulnerable to abuse, as Pakistani police and local officials threatened undocumented Afghans. While the numbers deported or coerced to leave decreased compared to 2023, over 220,000 had returned to Afghanistan by September 2024, 88 percent of whom cited of whom cited fear of arrest as the reason. In July, the Pakistan government announced a one-year extension to more than 1.45 million Afghan refugees who held UNHCR-issued Proof of Registration (PoR) cards. However, government officials maintained that the push to deport the remaining two million unregistered Afghans would continue. In addition, Afghans living in Pakistan faced difficulties in accessing employment and education.

## Economic Justice and Rights

With poverty, inflation, and unemployment soaring, Pakistan's economic crisis jeopardized the rights to health, food, and an adequate standard of living for millions. An International Monetary Fund (IMF) program was conditioned on numerous austerity

measures including removing subsidies without adequate compensatory measures, resulting in additional hardship for low-income groups. Colonial-era laws such as the Land Acquisition Act, 1894 continued to be used to evict low-income communities. In April, the Supreme Court ordered the removal of "encroachments" in Karachi to clear the roads; similar orders have led to mass displacements of low-income communities.

## Violence against Women and Girls

Violence against women and girls — including rape, murder, acid attacks, domestic violence, denial of education, sexual harassment at work, and child and forced marriage — is a serious problem throughout Pakistan, and the government has not taken meaningful steps in response. Human rights defenders estimate that roughly 1,000 women are murdered in so-called "honor killings" every year.

While Pakistan faces a problem of reliable data of violence against women, the vulnerability of women in Pakistan was spotlighted by media reports in August finding 46 cases of abduction and sexual violence against women were reported in a single district of Punjab, Mandi Bahauddin, over a period of less than a month from July 1 to 24.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that 18.9 million of the country's women and girls married before the age of 18, including 4.6 million before the age of 15. In 2023, UNICEF found that 18 percent of girls and 5 percent of boys married before age 18. Married girls are often forced into pregnancies that are dangerous due to the girl's young age and pregnancies being closely spaced. Women from religious minority communities are particularly vulnerable to forced marriage.

## Children's Rights

Over 6 million children of primary school age and 13 million children of secondary school age were out of school, most of them girls. Human Rights Watch found that girls miss school for reasons including lack of schools, costs associated with studying, child marriage, harmful child labor, and gender discrimination. Employment of child domestic workers remains prevalent despite attempts to prohibit it.

Child sexual abuse remains common. The children's rights organization Sahil reported that in the first six months of 2024, 862 cases of child sexual abuse, 668 cases of abduction, 82 cases of missing children, and 18 cases of child marriages were reported.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Same-sex sexual conduct between men remains a criminal offense under Pakistan's criminal code, placing men who have sex with men and transgender women at a high risk of police abuse and other forms of violence and discrimination.

Transgender women continue to be targeted with violence. According to media reports, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province recorded 267 cases of violence against transgender persons in the last five years, with only one resulting in a conviction. At least seven transgender women were killed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2024.

# Peru

In 2024, the Peruvian Congress passed laws and adopted other decisions that undermined judicial independence, weakened democratic institutions, and hindered investigations into organized crime, corruption, and human rights violations.

President Dina Boluarte made little or no effort to stop these congressional attacks against democracy and the rule of law and her administration also pursued policies that contributed to the erosion of democratic norms. These included efforts to suppress protests and a growing disregard for judicial independence.

## Public Sector Corruption

Corruption is a major factor driving the deterioration of public institutions, deficient public services, and environmental destruction in Peru. Five former presidents have been charged with corruption. President Boluarte remains under investigation for allegedly receiving illicit contributions for her political campaign and expensive watches from a provincial governor. As of May 2024, 67 of the 130 members of Congress were under criminal investigation for corruption and other offenses, media outlets reported on the basis of information provided by the Attorney General's Office.

In December 2023, Congress modified the Efficient Collaboration Law, which had been a key tool to investigate corruption. The changes drastically shortened the period prosecutors have to corroborate a collaborator's statements, making it harder for prosecutors to use this tool to investigate. The bill was approved in June 2023, but President Boluarte vetoed it in July; Congress overrode the president's veto.

In July 2024, Congress approved a bill to narrow the definition of "organized crime," making it harder for prosecutors to investigate related offenses, including corruption and extortion, and rendering investigative searches largely ineffective. President Boluarte did not veto the bill; it became law in August. In October, Congress reintroduced extortion and other crimes into the definition of "organized crime," but kept the exclusion of many corruption offenses and failed to address all changes that undermined investigative searches.

## Threats to Judicial and Prosecutorial Independence

Throughout 2024, Congress moved forward with efforts to weaken the National Board of Justice, the body in charge of appointing and removing judges, prosecutors, and electoral authorities, which has played a key role in protecting the separation of powers in Peru.

In March 2024, Congress removed two members of the National Board of Justice citing a disagreement between lawmakers and the board over the interpretation of the law regarding the required age to be a member of the board. At the time, the two members were investigating an alleged influence-peddling scheme involving members of Congress and then-Attorney General Patricia Benavides. On July 1, a tribunal ordered that the board members be reinstated, citing due process violations.

In June, Congress' Constitutional Committee moved forward a constitutional amendment to eliminate the National Board of Justice. The change would put legislators in charge of appointing and removing electoral authorities, among others. The proposal remained pending at time of writing.

Then-Attorney General Benavides targeted senior anti-corruption prosecutors with abusive disciplinary investigations. As a result, authorities suspended prosecutor Rafael Vela, who led investigations into the involvement of Peruvian officials and businesspeople in the international corruption scheme known as Lava Jato. A court ordered that he be reinstated in March.

In May, the National Board of Justice removed Attorney General Benavides after concluding that she interfered with an investigation against her sister, a judge, who was accused of taking bribes to release organized crime members.

In September, Congress approved a bill that places the investigation of crimes in the hands of the police, taking functions away from the Attorney General's Office. Peruvian prosecutors and associations of lawyers warned that the bill would undermine the efficiency and speed of investigations. President Boluarte did not veto the bill; it became law in October.

In October, a seven-member commission led by the ombudsman appointed new members to the National Board of Justice for the 2025-2029 term. An international mission of experts that observed the process said that "it fail[ed] to meet international standards of transparency, publicity, technical criteria, and citizen participation."

## Security Policies

Crime is a major concern for Peruvians. As of October 2024, the number of homicides had already exceeded the total number in 2023. Criminal complaints for extortion increased by five between 2021 to 2023, and many cases go unreported.

President Boluarte put into effect states of emergency, suspending basic rights in parts of the country, including neighborhoods in Lima, the capital, to respond to crime. The strategy has often been ineffective, security experts told Human Rights Watch.

The president has also blamed, without presenting evidence, Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers for the increase in crime.

In November, Congress passed a bill to lower the age of criminal responsibility for aggravated homicide, extorsion, kidnapping, rape, and other serious offenses from 18 to 16. The judiciary, the Attorney General's Office, and the Ombudsperson's Office, along with some ministries, opposed this measure or found it unfeasible.

## Impunity

Peru has made limited progress in investigating and prosecuting atrocities committed during the country's armed conflict (1980-2000).

In July 2024, Congress approved a bill that subjects war crimes and crimes against humanity committed before 2003 to a statute of limitations, violating an Inter-American Court of Human Rights order to halt the bill's discussion because it would contravene international human rights law. Two United Nations special rapporteurs and a working group said the bill "encourage[d] impunity and [was] in patent contradiction with the Rule of law." Prosecutors have warned the law could jeopardize some 600 criminal cases

concerning security forces and the Shining Path, a Maoist armed group. President Boluarte did not veto the bill; it became law in August.

In September, former President Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) died. A Constitutional Tribunal ruling in December 2023 had released him from prison, where he was serving a 25-year sentence for his role in extrajudicial killings, abductions, enforced disappearances, and corruption. His release violated orders from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

Authorities have also failed to adequately investigate and prosecute the deaths of 49 protesters or bystanders that took place during protests between December 2022 and February 2023. The response by the military and police was indiscriminate and disproportionate. Security forces fired assault rifles and handguns at unarmed protesters and bystanders. As of November, nobody had been convicted of these killings.

In January 2024, a judge in Cuzco ordered the pretrial detention of a police member accused of shooting dozens of pellets at protester Rosalino Florez in January 2023, causing his death.

The Attorney General's Office asked Congress to investigate the role of President Boluarte and some of her cabinet members in the killings. Congress had made little if any progress at time of writing.

## Shrinking Civic Space

In March 2024, the Attorney General's Office opened a criminal investigation against journalist Gustavo Gorriti and two anti-corruption prosecutors for alleged influence peddling. Prosecutors argued that Gorriti and the prosecutors exchanged sensitive information on ongoing investigations and requested Gorriti hand over his phone. The Committee to Protect Journalists said that "the right of reporters to maintain confidential sources" was at risk. Gorriti refused to hand over his phone and filed a lawsuit to stop the investigation, citing violations of his rights as journalist.

In June, Congress' Foreign Relations Committee advanced a bill that would vastly increase the government's powers to control nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that receive

foreign funds. The bill uses overbroad and vague language that would, in practice, provide the government with the power to arbitrarily fine or sanction groups that criticize or oppose government actions.

Sixteen embassies in Peru, as well as the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and several US senators, expressed concern about the bill. Congress had not approved or rejected the bill at time of writing.

A right-wing group known as "*La Resistencia*" has repeatedly publicized the addresses and met outside the homes of journalists and the offices of human rights defenders and anti-corruption prosecutors, in an effort to intimidate them. The group's members have insulted, harassed, and physically attacked journalists, with little to no response from authorities.

## Economic and Social Rights

As of 2023, 28 percent of the population lived under the national monetary poverty line of US$67 per month, a sharp increase from 20 percent in 2019—pre-pandemic, latest official data showed. People living in extreme poverty amounted to 5.7 percent of the population in 2023, compared to 3 percent in 2019. Children, people living in rural areas, and those who self-report as Black or Indigenous disproportionately live in poverty.

There are deep disparities in people's ability to realize their economic and social rights. Peru's urban and coastal communities enjoy better access to public services than rural and Indigenous populations. The latest national census from 2017 shows that only 52 percent of Indigenous people had access to a public sewage system, compared to 75 percent of the general population, and only one-third of Indigenous communities in the Amazon had access to a health facility. The Ombudsperson's Office reported understaffing and lack of electricity in health facilities in the Amazon mostly used by Indigenous people.

## Environment and Human Rights

In December 2023, Congress amended the country's Forestry Law. The local NGO Peruvian Society of Environmental Law (SPDA) alerted that the law, in practice, regularizes past

large-scale illegal deforestation. Peruvian prosecutors have said the law hinders environmental crime investigations.

Peru lost 150,000 hectares of primary forest in 2023, according to the latest data compiled by Global Forest Watch. Illegal logging, cattle ranching, mining, and, to a lesser extent, coca cultivation for drug trafficking, are driving the destruction of the Amazon. Illegal use of mercury for gold mining, often smuggled in across the border from Bolivia, is contaminating waterways and likely impacting human health, officials told Human Rights Watch.

Groups involved in illegal exploitation of natural resources and land grabbing routinely threaten and attack forest defenders. In April, Victorio Dariquebe Gerewa, a ranger of a nature reserve located in the Peruvian Amazon, in Madre de Dios department, was murdered. Illegal miners had reportedly threatened him.

In July, Indigenous leader Mariano Isacama Feliciano was found dead, 24 days after he went missing. Leaders from his community in the Ucayali department attributed the killing to his opposition to drug cartels operating in their territory.

In 2021, the government created an inter-ministerial mechanism for the protection of human rights defenders, but as of May 2024, it was only staffed by 10 people and had no independent budget.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In May, President Boluarte's administration published a presidential decree classifying trans identities as mental health conditions in the country's Essential Health Insurance Plan. After vociferous criticism from human rights organizations, the health ministry suspended the implementation of the decree.

Peru does not allow same-sex marriage or legal gender recognition for transgender people, and lacks comprehensive anti-LGBT discrimination legislation.

## Access to Abortion

Women, girls, and pregnant people can legally access abortions only when a pregnancy threatens their life or health; even then, many face barriers. Peru has failed to implement the majority of the recommendations outlined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in June 2023, which found Peru responsible for violating the rights of an Indigenous girl who had become forcibly pregnant at 13. The Committee had called on Peru to ensure access to safe abortion services and post abortion care for pregnant girls, and to ensure all children have access to education on sexual and reproductive health.

## Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Between September 2013 and September 2024, the education ministry registered 15,092 cases of sexual violence against students committed by teachers, school staff, or students across the country. From January through September 2024, 2,514 cases of sexual violence in schools were reported.

In June, media revealed that between 2010 and 2024, over 500 cases of sexual violence were reported against students in the Awajún, Wampi, and Chapra Indigenous communities in Condorcanqui province, Amazonas department. Many of the cases occurred in schools with student housing. Over one hundred teachers were administratively dismissed, but many were reportedly still teaching in schools. None of these child sexual abuse complaints have resulted in a conviction.

Following public backlash, the government established a commission to improve its response to violence cases, committed to building a Gesell chamber to aid investigations involving child victims in Condorcanqui, and referred cases to prosecutors' offices for investigation.

Gender-based violence is a significant problem in Peru. The Ombudsperson's Office reported 133 femicides—defined as the killing of a woman or girl in certain contexts, including domestic violence—from January through October 2024. The office reported 150 femicides in 2023 and 137 in 2022.

# Philippines

The human rights situation in the Philippines has improved slightly under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. “Drug war” killings continued with near impunity but have become less frequent. Yet the government still refused to cooperate with the International Criminal Court’s investigation into possible crimes against humanity. Despite Marcos’s assurances to the international community that he is prioritizing human rights, abuses such as extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and harassment and intimidation of critics through “red-tagging” still occurred.

## Extrajudicial and Summary Killings

Extrajudicial killings, often perpetrated by the police during drug raids and by unidentified assailants, persisted in the Philippines throughout 2024. Monitoring by Dahas shows that 332 were killed across the Philippines between January and November 15, 2024, with security forces responsible for more than 50 percent of the killings. Since Marcos took office on July 1, 2022, 841 have died in drug-related killings.

Other killings by so-called death squads or hired assassins—often riding pillion on motorcycles—occurred frequently in Metro Manila and other urban areas. With mid-term elections slated for 2025, political violence targeting local officials increased in the second half of 2024.

In August, Congress launched joint hearings on extrajudicial killings in the “drug war” and whether money from drugs and illegal gambling were used by the previous administration of President Rodrigo Duterte to finance killings by the police. Former police officials also implicated Duterte and other police officials in the murder of suspected “drug lords” while in detention. Two other witnesses testified that they were coerced into fabricating false allegations against Duterte’s top critic, former Senator Leila de Lima, who, as a result, was detained for nearly seven years.

## Enforced Disappearances

The human rights group Karapatan reported that 14 people were forcibly disappeared under President Marcos, with four new cases in 2024. The latest victims were James

Jimenez, the brother of a leader of the communist movement, and his friend Felix Salaveria Jr., who were reportedly abducted in Tabaco City in the central Philippines in August. Victims of enforced disappearances are often activists, including land rights and environmental defenders.

The Philippines has not signed nor ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Congress passed a law against enforced disappearances in 2012, but the Philippine government has not enforced the law and has failed to allocate funds to implement it.

## Red-Tagging, Terror-Tagging of Activists

Red-tagging, which involves accusing individuals and organizations of being communists or communist sympathizers, remained a serious problem. The practice shrinks the space for freedom of expression and association, which government officials and their proxies use to intimidate critics. Red-tagging, which frequently occurs online and in the media, often leads to physical violence. In recent years, targets have broadened from leftist activists to Indigenous leaders, land rights defenders, and educators. Labor leaders have also been harassed by government agents for union activities.

The National Task Force on Ending the Local Armed Conflict, under the president's office and supervised by the National Security Council, is the main agency responsible for the rise in red-tagging. In a May ruling, the Supreme Court declared that red-tagging "threatens right to life, liberty, and security," the first time red-tagging was defined in Philippine jurisprudence.

Philippine authorities also increasingly use their powers under the Anti-Terror Act to file charges—often for alleged terrorist financing—against activists and civil society groups, a step beyond red-tagging known as "terror-tagging." Some individuals are facing charges in court, although at least 22 cases have been dismissed for lack for merit. In May, a court convicted child-rights activist Maria Salome Ujano of terrorist financing, the second activist to have been found guilty of the charge.

## Attacks Against Journalists, Freedom of Expression

The Philippines remains one of the deadliest places in the world to work as a journalist. In September, former Palawan provincial governor Joel Reyes surrendered to the authorities for allegedly ordering the 2011 killing of journalist and environmental defender. In May, a Manila court sentenced the alleged gunman in the 2022 murder of radio commentator Percival Mabasa to 16 years in prison. However, the alleged mastermind of the murder is still at large. In April, police arrested the suspects in the 2023 murder of broadcaster Juan Jumalon, who was shot to death while live on air.

In July, a court cleared Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa and her news website Rappler of their last tax evasion case filed by the Rodrigo Duterte administration.

Irene Khan, the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of expression, visited the Philippines in February and made several recommendations, including for the government to set up a special prosecutor to handle media killings.

## Filing of Charges, Arrest, and Detention of Critics

After nearly seven years in police detention, former senator Leila de Lima, the chief critic of Duterte's "war on drugs," was finally released on bail in November 2023. The court subsequently dismissed the remaining trumped-up cases against her in June. De Lima was the highest profile target of the Duterte government's efforts to quash criticism through the filing of politically motivated charges, a practice that has continued under the Marcos administration.

In July, a court in the southern Philippines convicted two leftist legislators and 11 teachers for alleged child abuse for rescuing Indigenous children from an area where military operations against communist insurgents were ongoing. While any case involving allegations of child abuse should be adequately investigated and prosecuted on its merits, the charges appear to have been politically motivated. In August, police arrested and detained four land rights and environmental activists for alleged illegal possession of firearms and explosives. The four alleged that they were tortured in detention.

Frenchie Mae Cumpio, a community journalist in Tacloban City in the central Philippines who reported on alleged military abuses, remains in police detention four years after she

was arrested. She faces illegal firearms and explosive charges but has not been brought to trial.

## Accountability and Justice

Accountability for killings in the "war on drugs" remains insignificant, although four police officers were convicted in June for the murders of a father and his son. Only three other cases have resulted in police officers being convicted for extrajudicial killings. The International Criminal Court's investigation into possible crimes against humanity in the "drug war" is ongoing, although the Marcos administration refuses to cooperate with the court.

The United Nations Joint Program on Human Rights in the Philippines, which provided technical cooperation to the Philippine government in response to the "war on drugs," ended in July. The government hailed it as a success and promised to sustain its "gains" through the creation of a "human rights super body." Civil society organizations, however, criticized the program for failing to deliver accountability for serious rights abuses. In March, the European Union and the Philippines announced the resumption of free trade negotiations after these were suspended in 2017 due to concerns over "drug war" killings.

For the first time, the Philippine Congress decided to investigate the thousands of extrajudicial killings in the "war on drugs." In hearings from August through November, police officials disclosed that the Duterte administration ordered the "elimination" of drug suspects, including three suspected Chinese drug lords who were killed—allegedly on Duterte's orders—while in detention.

## Drug Policy Reform

In July, the government held a summit that convened key government and UN agencies along with civil society and harm reduction groups to discuss drug policy reform, including the overhaul of the existing anti-drug law. While the government agreed that reform was needed, with President Marcos announcing a "paradigm shift," it remained unclear how the government would go about changing the existing laws and policies that underpinned the brutality of the "war on drugs."

## Laws on Discrimination, Civil Partnership and Divorce

Congress has failed to enact proposed legislation that would prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics, nor has it passed a civil partnership bill that would protect some rights for same-sex couples. In May, legislators passed a bill that would legalize divorce in the Philippines, opening the possibility of the law's full passage soon.

# Poland

In 2024, the coalition government led by Donald Tusk that came to power in December 2023 started addressing rule of law concerns that developed during the previous Law and Justice (PiS) government. New measures included reform proposals to the judiciary and steps to restore media freedom, some of them controversial. Reforms to strengthen women's and girl's reproductive rights and the rights of LGBT individuals were slow to materialize and insufficient. While Poland opened its borders to refugees from Ukraine, unlawful and sometimes violent pushbacks of migrants and asylum seekers to Belarus continued.

## Rule of Law and Public Institutions

In January 2024, Justice Minister Adam Bodnar presented a bill that aimed to depoliticize the National Council of the Judiciary (NJC). In April, the Sejm—the lower house of parliament—adopted amendments to the bill on the NJC requiring that members of the NJC be elected by judges, not parliamentarians as had been the case since 2018. In May, taking into account criticism by the Council of Europe Venice Commission, the Senate—the upper house of parliament—adopted the bill with amendments allowing judges appointed under the previous government (so-called neo-judges) to stand for re-election to the new NCJ. The amendments were rejected by the Sejm in July, resulting in the exclusion of new judges for election to the NJC. PiS-aligned President Andrzej Duda in August sent the law to the Constitutional Tribunal, stalling the reform process.

In April, Bodnar established a codification commission tasked with reforming the courts and freeing the prosecutor's office from political influence.

In February, Bodnar dismissed the president and vice-president of the Poznan appeals court appointed to their positions by former justice minister Zbigniew Ziobro, and indicated that more dismissals would follow. Also in February, a competition commission chose Dariusz Korneluk—who in 2016 had been demoted and later faced disciplinary charges when Ziobro led the ministry—to be the new national prosecutor. Bodnar stated that he would separate the positions of attorney general and justice minister, merged by the previous government.

By June, Bodnar had initiated dismissal procedures against 81 presidents and vice presidents of courts across Poland at the request of judges in those jurisdictions and with the approval of the court college of presidents. Also in June, President Duda, in violation of the Polish Constitution and EU law, appointed 60 neo-judges.

The new director of the National School of Judiciary and Public Prosecution under the Justice Ministry, tasked with educating future judges and prosecutors, in July decided that neo-judges and judges who signed lists supporting candidates for the neo-NJC could no longer teach at the school.

Justice Minister Bodnar in August withdrew two cassation complaints before the Supreme Court that had been filed by former Justice Minister Ziobro. The complaints had sought to overturn verdicts in favor of two judges who had been politically targeted and subjected to disciplinary proceedings by the former government.

In August, Bodnar asked the European Parliament to lift the immunity of Michal Dworczyk, a new Polish MP who was head of the prime minister's office under former PiS PM Morawiecki, over his involvement in a scandal triggered by leaked emails published on Telegram in 2021. The emails included discussions between Dworczyk and Morawiecki about cases investigated by the PiS-controlled Constitutional Tribunal and messages to the previous president of the public broadcaster, Jacek Kurski, about public smear campaigns on behalf of the government. Bodnar acted in his capacity of prosecutor general, an office that in Poland has often been concurrently held by the Minister of Justice.

## Freedom of Media

In December 2023, Culture Minister Bartłomiej Sienkiewicz ordered the liquidation of public broadcasters TVP, Polskie Radio, and the Polish Press Agency. In January, the Warsaw District Court approved the decision to put the Polish Press Agency into liquidation, and by mid-February courts also had accepted the liquidation of all regional branches of Polskie Radio.

In February and March, authorities detained four Ukrainian journalists on two separate occasions for reporting close to the Poland-Ukraine border. In the March incident, the

Polish Internal Security Service ordered the deportation of two journalists as “persons who threaten the national security of Poland,” with no further details provided.

## Attacks on Civil Society

Legal proceedings against five volunteers providing humanitarian aid to migrants continued. The five were arrested in 2022 and are facing charges of illegally organizing crossings of the Poland-Belarus border, with prison terms up to five years. The first hearing is scheduled for January 2025. In September, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Michael O’Flaherty called on Polish authorities to drop criminal charges against the humanitarian volunteers.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people continued to face discrimination and demonization.

In June, Bodnar revoked a directive issued under previous Justice Minister Ziobro that had prevented recognition of same-sex marriage certificates obtained abroad.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in a September ruling stated that the lack of legal recognition for same-sex partnerships in Poland left couples in a “legal vacuum” in violation of their human rights. The ECtHR called on Poland to create a legal framework granting same-sex couples the same recognition and protection of their relationships that heterosexual couples enjoy.

## Women’s and Girls’ Rights

In August, the government issued new guidelines aiming to facilitate access to safe abortions. The guidelines state that a recommendation from one specialist doctor is enough to obtain a legal abortion at a hospital, and that doctors performing the procedure should not face prosecution. Reproductive rights activists said the guidelines are insufficient and called for full decriminalization of abortion.

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in August found that Poland’s restrictive abortion law inflicts serious harm on women, resulting in grave

and systematic violations of their human rights. The committee called on Poland to legalize and fully decriminalize abortion and recognize access to abortion care as a fundamental right.

The Sejm in June adopted amendments to the definition of rape in the criminal code making it a crime to engage in sexual intercourse without consent.

The Supreme Court in August threw out a case against Deputy Culture Minister Joanna Scheuring-Wielgus, previously an opposition politician, brought against her for offending religious feelings when she staged a protest in a church in 2020 against the previous government's introduction of its near total abortion ban.

## Refugees, Migrants, and Asylum Seekers

As of late September, Poland was hosting 970,120 refugees from Ukraine, out of a total of 1,837,620 who had registered for temporary protection in Poland since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

According to an aid group citing information from the Polish Border Guard Directorate, between December 2023 and August at least 9,889 pushbacks occurred on the Belarus border. A volunteer group published footage of a May pushback of migrants by Polish border guards. In September, Commissioner O'Flaherty called on Polish authorities to stop all summary returns to Belarus.

In March, a Bialystok court in two separate cases found that border guards had violated the law by pushing Afghan and Ethiopian migrants across the border to Belarus after they crossed irregularly to Poland.

Following the stabbing to death of a Polish border guard preventing migrants crossing in June, the government reintroduced a no-go zone at its border with Belarus, preventing aid workers and journalists from operating in the designated area. In September, the government extended the no-go zone for 90 days.

In July, the parliament adopted legislation making it easier for border guards, soldiers, and other uniformed staff at the border to use firearms. The law removes criminal liability for

employing weapons in certain cases, including “repelling a direct and unlawful attack” that threatens the “life, health or freedom” of officers during an “attack on the inviolability of the state border,” or when “counteracting actions directly aimed” at such an attack. President Duda signed the law into effect in August. Commissioner O’Flaherty in September called on Poland to repeal the law.

# Qatar

Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup left a legacy of widespread migrant labor abuses, including thousands of unexplained deaths, rampant wage theft, and exorbitant recruitment fees. Qatari authorities and FIFA have failed to compensate abused workers who made the tournament possible. Migrant workers also faced new forms of exploitation after the tournament ended and are at risk of government backtracking on existing reforms. Qatari laws discriminate against women due to abusive male guardianship policies and against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals. Authorities restrict free expression and have strengthened their surveillance capabilities. After the 2022-2024 term, Qatar was re-elected to serve as a member of the UN Human Rights Council for the term 2025-2027. As a member, Qatar should "uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights."

## Migrant Worker Rights

Migrant workers form over 91 percent of Qatar's population and are governed by the abusive *kafala* (sponsorship) system that gives employers disproportionate control over workers. In the lead up to the tournament, Qatar introduced significant labor reforms that allow migrant workers to change jobs or exit the country without employer permission, initiated wage protection measures such as Wage Protection System and Workers' Support and Insurance Fund, and set a higher minimum wage for all workers. Yet, the benefits of these initiatives have been limited due to their late introduction, narrow scope, and weak enforcement.

Abusive elements of the kafala system remain intact. Workers still struggle to change jobs easily as in practice they are required to obtain signed letters from their original employer approving their resignation. Workers are unable to change jobs even when their employers fail to pay them. Qatar risks backtracking on some of the reforms, exemplified by the Qatar's advisory Shura Council's 2024 proposal to adopt measures that would require migrant workers to obtain their employer's permission before being allowed to leave the country. In 2020, Qatar extended the reform removing the requirement to obtain an exit permit to leave the country to include domestic workers.

Qatar's minimum wage, introduced in 2021, is set at QAR 1,000 (US$274) per month. This amount does not account for the high living expenses in Qatar and has not been revised since 2021, when it was first introduced. Human Rights Watch has documented that widespread wage abuses have persisted. In many cases, migrant workers resort to protests and strikes against wage delays despite the risk of arrest and deportation.

Leaving an employer without permission, known as "absconding," remains a crime. Passport confiscations, high recruitment fees, and deceptive recruitment practices remain largely unpunished. Despite the scrutiny brought on migrant worker deaths in Qatar in the lead up to the 2022 World Cup, Qatar has failed to prevent, investigate, or compensate the deaths of thousands of migrant workers.

The new UK government announced the resumption of negotiations for a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), despite ongoing concerns about the lack of transparency, oversight, and inclusion of concrete human rights protections and commitments in any agreement, particularly for migrant workers.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

Women in Qatar are subjected to male guardianship laws that discriminate against and undermine women's right to make autonomous decisions about marriage, divorce, and children.

Qatar's Personal Status Law provides that women can only marry if a male guardian approves of the marriage while men do not need permission and are allowed to have up to four wives at once. A woman is also required to obey her husband, maintain the house and its contents, and breastfeed children unless there is an impediment. A wife can lose her right to maintenance if she refuses to have sexual relations with her husband "without a legitimate reason" or works outside the marital home without her husband's permission.

Women do not have a unilateral right to divorce on an equal basis as men and must apply to the courts for divorce on limited grounds, such as if her husband is impotent, has abandoned or harmed her, or if her husband fails to provide financial support.

Female siblings receive half the amount their brothers get under inheritance provisions.

Women in Qatar face mobility restrictions preventing them from moving freely in their own country and travelling outside Qatar without the permission of their male guardians. For example, female students in Qatar are required to show that they have male guardian permission before they can go on field trips or stay at or leave campus accommodations or grounds. Interior ministry rules require unmarried Qatari women under 25 to show male guardian permission to travel abroad while Qatari men can travel without such permission from age 18. Male guardians can apply to issue travel bans on their female relatives or wives.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Qatar's penal code criminalizes extramarital sex. Individuals convicted of *zina* (sex outside of marriage) can be sentenced to up to seven years imprisonment. Muslims can also be sentenced to flogging (if unmarried) or the death penalty (if married) for *zina*. These laws disproportionately impact women, as pregnancy serves as evidence of extramarital sex and women who report rape can find themselves prosecuted for consensual sex.

Qatar's penal code criminalizes consensual sexual relations outside marriage, including same-sex relations, with up to seven years in prison. The Law on Protection of Community allows for provisional detention without charge or trial for up to six months, if "there exist well-founded reasons to believe that the defendant may have committed a crime," including "violating public morality." Qatari authorities also censor mainstream media reports about sexual orientation and gender identity.

Qatari authorities in February arrested a British-Mexican national, Manuel Guerrero Aviña, who lived in Qatar for seven years, after agreeing to meet someone through the Grindr dating app. While he was targeted for his sexual orientation and HIV status, he was charged with drug offenses. He left Qatar in August after an unsuccessful appeal.

## Freedom of Expression

Qatar's penal code criminalizes criticizing the emir, insulting Qatar's flag, defaming religion including blasphemy, and inciting "to overthrow the regime." Qatar's cybercrime

law punishes online activity that authorities perceive to spread “false news,” “violates social values or principles,” or “insults or slanders others.”

In 2024, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention took up the case of Abdul Ibhais, a former media and communications director for the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy who is serving jail sentence for bribery but claims being subject to a malicious prosecution in retaliation for his criticism of handling of a migrant workers’ strike in Qatar in August 2019. The UN Working Group concluded that there was no legal basis for his detention and that there were multiple violations of his right to a fair trial, including refusing to investigate his allegations of a coerced confession and denying him legal assistance.

## Statelessness

Qatar’s decision to arbitrarily strip families from the Ghufran clan of their citizenship since 1996 has left some members stateless and deprived them of basic human rights like the right to work, access to health care, education, marriage and starting a family, owning property, and freedom of movement.

## Climate Change Policy and Actions

Qatar is the 14th largest oil producer worldwide, has the third largest natural gas reserves globally and is among the highest greenhouse gas emissions per capita globally. Qatar is increasing liquefied natural gas production for export instead of taking concrete steps to move away from the production and use of fossil fuels.

Migrant workers continue to be exposed to extreme heat risks despite the introduction of new protections against heat stress, including prohibiting work when the Wet Bulb Globe Temperature (WBGT) exceeds 32.1 degrees Celsius. Although these protections in Qatar go further than other GCC states, they offer considerably less than what is needed, as the 32.1 degrees Celsius WBGT threshold is set too high to effectively protect workers and enforcement gaps remain. Qatari authorities’ failure to protect migrant workers from climate change-related extreme heat exposure and related illnesses, including organ failure, shifts the care burden to overstretched healthcare systems of migrant origin countries.

## Granting Health Access to Injured Palestinians from Gaza

Qatari authorities invited a team of Human Rights Watch researchers to Doha in June 2024 and facilitated their unrestricted access to hospitals treating Palestinians who were injured in Gaza, as well as to a housing complex that family members of the medical patients were residing in.

# Russia

As Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine entered its third year, authorities in 2024 intensified their crackdown on civil society and dissent. They again expanded Russia's repressive legislative arsenal and targeted critics with punitive and stigmatizing "foreign agent," "undesirable," and "extremist" labels, hefty fines, and lengthy prison sentences.

In February, opposition leader Alexei Navalny died in prison, where he was serving a draconian sentence imposed over a litany of spurious and politically motivated charges. His supporters and independent journalists alleged that security services poisoned him, citing discrepancies in official documents about the circumstances of his death.

In March, Vladimir Putin won the presidential election in the absence of any competition, securing his fifth term in office.

In October, the UN Human Rights Council, noting "the continued significant deterioration" of human rights in Russia, renewed the mandate of the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation.

## Freedom of Expression

War censorship laws enacted after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and repeatedly expanded and toughened since, remained a major tool to stifle voices denouncing Russia's war.

February amendments enabled authorities to confiscate property of persons convicted under a range of charges, including "fake news" about the Russian military, and increased penalties for public calls that "undermine state security." The measures appeared aimed at punishing exiled critics and their family members who remain in Russia.

In February, a court in Moscow sentenced prominent rights defender Oleg Orlov, co-chair of Memorial, to two-and-a-half years in prison for repeatedly speaking out against Russia's war on Ukraine and escalating political repression within Russia.

In July, a court in Yekaterinburg sentenced *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich to 16 years in prison on farcical espionage charges. Also in July, another court sentenced theater director Yevgenia Berkovich and playwright Svetlana Petriychuk to six years on false charges of publicly "justifying terrorism" for their award-winning play.

In an opinion published in February, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) concluded that Alexey Moskalev's deprivation of liberty was arbitrary, imposed for a legitimate exercise of his expression rights, and called on Russian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release him. Moskalev served out his 22-month prison sentence for repeatedly criticizing the war and was released in October.

In 2024, the authorities had pressed new criminal charges against at least 78 people at time of writing for "discrediting" Russia's military or disseminating "fake news," and 130 people remained imprisoned on these charges.

In August, Russia freed 15 people as part of a historic prisoner swap. Among them were Gershkovich and a handful of Russian political and civic activists whose imprisonment was politically motivated, including Orlov, Vladimir Kara-Murza, and Ilya Yashin. However, many more remain behind bars: as of December, Memorial's political prisoners project recorded 783 political prisoners in Russia.

In June, the Supreme Court outlawed the "Anti-Russian Separatist Movement" as "extremist." No such organization exists, but authorities listed dozens of real organizations and movements as its "branches," including many indigenous rights groups.

In 2024, 33 Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to up to 8.5 years in prison on "extremism" charges. Since the religion was banned as "extremist" in 2017, over 40 members have spent time behind bars, either awaiting trial or serving a prison sentence.

## Laws on "Foreign Agents" and "Undesirables"

Russian authorities continued expanding and using legislation on "foreign agents" and "undesirable" organizations to target media, human rights defenders, and other critics.

An August 2024 law expanded the scope of "undesirable" legislation, allowing the authorities to designate as such any foreign or international organization, not only nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

In 2024, the prosecutor general designated 64 organizations as "undesirable," including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Belsat, *The Moscow Times*, and NGOs Freedom House, Article 19, and Feminist Anti-War Resistance. Also designated was Global Giving, a charity platform that many Russian rights groups use for crowdfunding, prompting the platform to remove all Russian projects.

In 2024, at least three people were convicted on criminal charges of involvement with "undesirable" organizations, and authorities opened at least 12 new criminal cases.

Grigory Melkonyants remained in pre-trial detention at time of writing on charges of leading the Russian election monitoring group Golos. Authorities claimed, falsely, that Golos was the same organization as the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations, an NGO designated "undesirable" in 2021. If convicted, he faces up to six years in prison.

Authorities also continued administrative prosecutions against people for participating in "undesirable" organizations' activities. By April, courts received at least 19 administrative charge sheets against individuals allegedly "involved" with independent media that Russian authorities designated "undesirable." Acts of "involvement" included working for the outlets, giving interviews or comments, or sharing their materials online.

In September, a Moscow court fined prominent constitutional law scholar Elena Lukyanova on charges of involvement with an undesirable organization. Lukyanova is co-founder of Free University, an academic collective aiming to provide uncensored higher education that was designated as "undesirable" in 2023.

A March law prohibited placing advertisements in "foreign agent" media or advertising their websites and social media, designed to deprive "foreign agents" of advertisement revenues and thereby purporting to prevent "covert foreign interference" with Russia's domestic affairs.

In May 2024, the Duma adopted a law banning individuals labeled "foreign agents" from running for any public office and from serving on election commissions. The Justice Ministry designated independent presidential contender Ekaterina Duntsova a "foreign agent" after authorities prohibited her from running in March elections. Authorities also designated Pavel Ivanov, the Municipal Deputy of Basmanny District in Moscow, a "foreign agent," ending his bid for a seat in September Moscow local council elections.

At time of writing, the Justice Ministry had designated 150 people and entities as "foreign agents" in 2024, bringing the total to 901. Those targeted included independent media outlets Holod and Vot Tak, the Memorial Human Rights Defense Center and its co-chair Orlov, and constitutional law experts Lukyanova, Ilya Shablinskiy, and Grigory Vaypan.

In January, Help Needed, a charity, was designated a "foreign agent" and in August the organization announced its closure due to numerous problems resulting from the designation.

Russian authorities maintained stigmatizing labelling requirements for those even loosely deemed "affiliated" with "foreign agents."

In June 2024, Russia's media and communications oversight agency, Roskomnadzor, announced it had identified 45 people for criminal prosecution for failing to fulfil the "foreign agent" law's labelling requirements and that 25 criminal cases had been opened. Among those charged was Golos coordinator Sergei Piskunov, who at time of writing remained in pre-trial detention. In October, a court in Moscow sentenced French citizen and researcher Laurent Vinatier to 39 months in prison on "foreign agent" charges.

In October, law enforcement officers in Pskov raided the apartment of Lev Shlosberg, deputy chair of the opposition Yabloko party, who is facing criminal charges for repeatedly failing to mark his social media posts with the "foreign agent" label.

In July, the Justice Ministry issued the first known warnings under the 2023 law, targeting third parties who "assist" "foreign agents," to people who had reposted publications by "foreign agents" without the "foreign agent" label.

In October the ECtHR issued a judgement, finding that the “foreign agent” law violated Russia’s human rights obligations and created “an environment of suspicion and mistrust towards civil society actors and independent voices,” thereby “undermining the very foundations of a democratic society.”

## Reproductive Rights

Attacks on women’s reproductive rights continued in 2024. Some regional authorities pressured private clinics to stop performing abortions. In November 2023, a local official said that almost no private clinic was providing abortions in the Kursk region, and at time of writing, at least 12 regions had outlawed “persuading" women to have abortions. November laws banned “propaganda” for “refusing to have children” under threat of steep fines.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Russian authorities continued their crackdown on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.

The Supreme Court’s November 2023 ruling, which outlaws the “international LGBT movement” as an “extremist” organization, allows arbitrary prosecution of LGBT people and of anyone who defends their rights or expresses solidarity with them.

The ruling, which became public only in in mid-January 2024, declared the rainbow flag a forbidden symbol of the “LGBT movement.” In 2024, at least 44 people received administrative convictions for “displaying” LGBT movement symbols, mostly for posting the rainbow flag online. At least 7 people were detained for up to 15 days as punishment. Repeated convictions for displays of LGBT symbols entail criminal prosecution, punishable by up to four years in prison.

The ruling also stated that authorities had identified 281 “active participants in the movement.” These unnamed individuals could face up to 10 years in prison for involvement in an extremist organization.

In March, the Justice Ministry and Rosfinmonitoring, the governmental agency mandated to monitor money laundering and financing of terrorism, included the LGBT movement in their extremist and terrorist organization registries.

At least three groups supporting LGBT rights shut down their operations in Russia to avoid prosecution. Other consequences of the ruling have included a series of police raids on gay clubs, incidents of self-censorship, and an uptick in requests for legal advice from remaining LGBT support groups, which increasingly have turned to working clandestinely.

In March, authorities in Orenburg charged three workers at a bar that featured drag performances with "organizing" activities of the LGBT movement, referencing the Supreme Court's ruling. They face six to ten years in prison on these bogus charges.

Authorities also continued using "LGBT propaganda" laws to suppress and punish LGBT visibility.

In August, a court in Moscow fined a local resident 100,000 rubles (US$1000) for "LGBT propaganda" over an old social media post featuring same-sex people kissing. A court in Volgograd imposed detention and subsequent deportation on a transgender sex worker, a Tajik citizen, for her online publications. A court in Krasnoyarsk fined a bar staging drag performances 450,000 rubles (US$4900) for "propaganda," noting that they failed to prevent same-sex visitors from hugging and kissing.

Courts continued fining television channels and streaming services for running content featuring LGBT people or same-sex relations.

Publishers continued recalling books with LGBT content. A court in Nizhny Novgorod fined a bookstore 500,000 rubles (US$5000) for selling a novel including depictions of same-sex relations.

## Ill-Treatment in Custody

Russian authorities tortured, recorded, and shared recordings of the torture of at least two men held as suspects for the March 22, 2024 attack on a concert hall near Moscow, which claimed the lives of at least 144 people. Four suspects appeared at their closed-door

pretrial custody hearings with visible, extensive injuries. Despite strong indications that law enforcement and security services had been committing and publicizing torture, no official investigation had taken place at time of writing.

On February 16, Alexei Navalny died in a remote prison where he was serving a 19-year sentence. Navalny had been behind bars since his return to Russia in 2021, following medical treatment after surviving a 2020 poisoning attempt that many attributed to the Kremlin. In September, *The Insider* published an investigation alleging that his death resulted from another poisoning by government agents. Before his death, prison authorities arbitrarily and repeatedly sent him to various punishment cells and failed to provide him adequate medical care.

As of June, "at least 80 people prosecuted for political reasons ... are suffering from illnesses in detention and do not receive timely medical care," according to OVD-Info. In August, the UN Human Rights Committee requested that the Russian government "take urgent measures to provide comprehensive and appropriate medical care" to Igor Baryshnikov, serving a seven-and-a-half-year prison sentence for opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

## North Caucasus

Chechen authorities under governor Ramzan Kadyrov continued to target critics and retaliate against their family members. In June, Chechen authorities arbitrarily detained and disappeared the father and two brothers of Khasan Khalitov, an exiled Chechen blogger. They continued to coercively mobilize local residents to fight in Ukraine. In September, North Caucasus SOS, a leading LGBT rights group, reported that Chechen police hunted down seven gay men and blackmailed them into "volunteering" to serve in the war.

Earlier in 2024, North Caucasus SOS also alleged that a 23-year-old woman from Chechnya, who had fled her abusive family in 2023 but was later found by Chechen police in St Petersburg and forcibly returned to her family, died in an "honor killing." There has been no effective investigation into these allegations.

The July 2023 violent attack in Grozny against journalist Elena Milashina and lawyer Alexander Nemov has not been properly investigated. They were in Chechnya to attend a court hearing in a politically motivated case against Zarema Mussaeva. Mussaeva is serving a five-year prison sentence on false charges brought in retaliation for her exiled sons' public opposition to Kadyrov. Authorities repeatedly refused her parole.

In June, armed militants—apparently supporters of the Islamic State (ISIS)—targeted the two largest cities in Dagestan. They torched a church and a synagogue in Derbent and attacked a church and a police checkpoint in Makhachkala. The attacks killed at least 15 law enforcement personnel, four local residents, and wounded dozens. Responding to the attacks, Kadyrov told Chechen law enforcement that relatives of insurgents should be punished in the spirit of collective responsibility. "He who targets [a police officer] should understand that… we will kill them all–father, brother, uncle," he said.

## Migrants and Xenophobia

After several Tajik nationals were arrested as suspects in the March concert hall attack, migrants from Central Asia and other people with a non-Slavic appearance faced a notable increase in ethnic-based harassment and attacks.

Media reports described an increase in ethnic profiling, arbitrary arrests, and prolonged detention, as well as xenophobic harassment and violent attacks by private individuals and government officials. Authorities escalated anti-migrant rhetoric.

Laws adopted in August introduced a special "deportation regime" for foreigners who do not have valid identity documents or authorization to stay in Russia. They allow authorities to automatically place these individuals on a public registry of "controlled persons," banning them from driving, marrying, leaving a municipality, changing residence without state permission, and opening bank accounts or making financial transactions (including withdrawing funds) exceeding a stipulated amount. The law authorizes police to enter without a court order any home where a person on the registry presumably resides or remains. It also authorizes the use of digital surveillance of these persons or individuals "assisting" them, including access to bank operations, cell data, and facial recognition technology.

Another August law empowered the police to extrajudicially sanction foreigners on a range of administrative charges, including for "LGBT propaganda." It also allows police officers to impose deportation as an administrative penalty, significantly undermining fair trial guarantees.

## Online Censorship, Surveillance, and Privacy

Authorities continued their campaign to censor and control independent voices online.

In March, a 2023 law entered into force that prohibits the promotion of censorship circumvention tools, including virtual private networks (VPNs). Between July and September, Apple blocked at least 25 VPN apps in its App Store in response to a request by Roskomnadzor.

In August, Roskomnadzor ordered the blocking of the secure instant messenger app Signal.

In August, a new law established a state registry of social media pages with an audience of more than 10,000 people. The law requires the owners of such pages to submit their personal information to the authorities and prohibits sharing the posts of unregistered owners of such pages. It also stipulates that only social media pages on the registry should be allowed to monetize their content.

Also in August, Russian authorities apparently introduced measures to drastically slow down YouTube. In September, Russian internet service providers said authorities were throttling YouTube using state-managed deep packet inspection technology installed in providers' networks.

The Russia-proposed UN Cybercrime Convention was agreed to by member states in November. The treaty establishes broad surveillance powers and has the potential to transform cross-border access to data and facilitate transnational repression.

## Freedom of Assembly

Freedom of assembly remained virtually non-existent. Russian authorities continued using Covid-19 restrictions in place since 2020 as a pretext to ban opposition protests while

allowing events aligned with official policies. In 2024, authorities made 1,185 arrests at rallies, according to the human rights group OVD-Info.

In January, police violently dispersed spontaneous assemblies in support of Bashkir activist Fail Alsynov, sentenced to four years in prison on bogus incitement of hatred charges for his speech at an environmental rally in Bashkortostan. Police detained dozens of protesters and brought at least 80 criminal cases alleging participation in mass rioting and use of force against police officers.

In February, authorities detained more than 500 people at events commemorating the memory of Alexei Navalny.

In March, during Russia's presidential vote, police detained at least 136 people over peaceful protests or election monitoring.

In February, a court in Khabarovsk outlawed an opposition movement as "extremist" after it organized a series of mass peaceful protests in support of former Khabarovsk governor Sergei Furgal, arrested in 2020.

## International Accountability

In 2024, key steps were taken to advance justice for serious international crimes Russian forces committed in Ukraine. The ICC investigation yielded four arrest warrants against senior Russian military commanders, addressing Russian forces' attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure.

However, enforcing the ICC's arrest warrants, including the 2023 warrant against Vladimir Putin, remains a challenge. Despite their arrest obligations, several ICC member countries have extended protocol to him. In September, Putin notably participated in an official ceremony in Mongolia, an ICC member country that HYPERLINK "https://kyivindependent.com/opinion-putins-red-carpet-in-mongolia-was-a-betrayal-of-justice-and-accountability/"failed to arrest and surrender him to the ICC. His visit rightfully generated condemnation from several state parties and the European Union.European Union.

Russia has repeatedly used its UN Security Council veto to prevent accountability for war crimes in Syria, Ukraine, and elsewhere. In March 2024, Russia used its veto to block renewal of the North Korea Panel of Experts, which had reported to the Security Council on North Korean arms transfers supporting Russia's military campaign in Ukraine, in violation of UN sanctions on Pyongyang. That effectively shut down the panel.

# Rwanda

The July presidential elections, which President Paul Kagame won with 99.15 percent of the vote, took place against a backdrop of repression. Allegations of ill-treatment of detainees continued, and in April, several prison officials and prisoners were convicted of murder and assault of prisoners at Rubavu prison. In May, Rwandan authorities denied entry to a senior researcher from Human Rights Watch.

Rwanda provided operational and logistical support to the M23 armed group in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where its troops carried out indiscriminate shelling on civilian areas and displacement camps. In July, the United Kingdom's newly-elected government scrapped a controversial plan by its predecessor to send asylum seekers to Rwanda.

## Justice for the 1994 Genocide

Thirty years after the 1994 genocide, that left more than half a million dead, efforts to deliver justice for the killings and ensure that those responsible are brought to account continue worldwide. Several individuals responsible for the genocide, including former high-level government officials and other key figures behind the massacres, have been brought to justice, and more prosecutions of genocide suspects are being conducted in domestic courts across Europe under the principle of universal jurisdiction, including over a dozen in France and Belgium. In January 2024, a 69-year-old Rwandan man was arrested in Gateshead, in the north of England, by police investigating genocide and crimes against humanity. He was released on bail.

Rwandan judicial authorities continued to investigate and prosecute genocide cases, including against individuals extradited from other countries. In January 2024, Wenceslas Twagirayezu, a Rwandan with Danish citizenship who was extradited to Rwanda in December 2018, was acquitted of genocide and crimes against humanity during the 1994 genocide. Twagirayezu's acquittal followed contradictory witness statements and evidence which demonstrated that he was not in Rwanda at the time of the events he was accused of having been involved in. A court of appeal convicted him and handed him a 20-year sentence in July.

To mark the 30 years since the genocide, Human Rights Watch released a series of archives highlighting the extraordinary efforts of human rights defenders in Rwanda and abroad, to warn about the planned 1994 genocide and attempt to stop the killings.

## Freedom of Association

In August, authorities shut down thousands of churches and prayer houses accused of failing to comply with health and safety regulations. By the end of August, more than 14,000 places of worship were reportedly inspected across the country, and over 8,000 closed for violations, according to Local Government Ministry figures. On August 28, authorities issued a ban on the activities of 43 religious groups accused of operating illegally.

In May, Rwandan immigration authorities denied entry to Clémentine de Montjoye, a senior researcher in the Africa division at Human Rights Watch, upon arrival at Kigali International Airport. De Montjoye traveled to Rwanda for meetings with officials but was told upon arrival that she was "not welcome in Rwanda" for undisclosed "immigration reasons," and Kenya Airways was instructed to ensure her removal from the country.

## Politicized Judiciary

The authorities' crackdown on the opposition, media, and civil society persisted ahead of general elections which took place on July 15, 2024. Rwandans were not able to freely express their views and exercise their vote fairly and peacefully.

Fourteen members of the unregistered Dalfa-Umurinzi opposition party and four journalists and critics are behind bars. Some spent more than three years in pretrial detention – and others have been convicted of offenses incompatible with international human rights norms. The trial of a group arrested in October 2021 for following an online training and planning a campaign on peaceful methods for expressing dissent began in December.

In March 2024, human rights defender François-Xavier Byuma was released from prison after serving a 17-year sentence following a *gacaca* trial – carried out by community-based courts – marred by grave procedural errors. The trial judge was known to have a prior conflict with Byuma but had refused to recuse himself, as the law required and Byuma

requested. Byuma, then the head of an association for the defense of children's rights, had previously investigated allegations that the judge had raped a minor. The judge also failed to accord Byuma the right to defend himself fully.

## Torture

Serious human rights abuses, including torture, are pervasive in many of Rwanda's detention facilities.

In November, the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) deferred the re-accreditation of Rwanda's National Commission for Human Rights, citing concerns over its failure to recognize serious human rights violations, including torture, and publicly report on them. Human Rights Watch's analysis concluded that the NCHR's work does not comply fully with the Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions (The Paris Principles), and that the institution does not fulfil its role as Rwanda's National Preventive Mechanism on torture.

On April 5, the Rubavu High Court, in the country's Western Province, convicted Innocent Kayumba, a former director of Rubavu and Nyarugenge prisons, of the assault and murder of a detainee at Rubavu prison in 2019, and handed him a 15-year sentence and 5 million Rwanda Francs fine (about US$ 3,700). Two other Rwanda Correctional Service (RCS) officers and seven prisoners, who were accused of acting under instruction, were convicted of beating and killing prisoners. Three senior RCS officials, including former Director Ephrem Gahungu and Deputy Director Augustin Uwayezu, were acquitted.

In January, Dieudonné Niyonsenga, a journalist serving a seven-year sentence at Nyarugenge prison, told a Kigali court that he was detained in a "hole" that often fills with water, without access to light, and is beaten frequently. He said his hearing and eyesight were impaired due to his three-year long detention in "inhuman" conditions and beatings, according to court transcripts and the Voice of America's reporting.

## Support to the M23 Armed Group

Throughout the first half of 2024, the Rwandan military and the M23 armed group it supports gained ground closer to Goma, in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, and

surrounded the city and displacement camps hosting over half a million people who have had to flee their homes. All parties to the conflict have increasingly carried out apparent violations of the laws of war.

Human Rights Watch documented five apparently unlawful attacks by Rwandan forces and the M23 since January in which artillery or rocket fire struck displacement camps or populated areas near Goma. On May 3, Rwandan or M23 forces launched at least three rockets into displacement camps around Goma, killing at least 17 civilians, including 15 children. The Congolese army placed artillery positions and other military objectives close to the camps, putting civilians at unnecessary risk. M23 fighters also raped women and girls crossing into their territory to look for food.

The European Union and the United States have imposed sanctions on leaders of abusive armed groups in eastern Congo, including the M23, and on several Rwandan officials responsible for supporting abusive armed groups. In July, the EU sanctioned Col. Augustin Migabo of the Rwandan Defence Force (RDF) for his role in supporting the M23 armed group. In November, the EU granted a second tranche of financial support to the RDF for their deployment in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province, despite concerns over the lack of sufficient safeguards around the disbursement of the first support package. The UK did not call on Rwanda to end its assistance to the M23 and has not sanctioned responsible individuals.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Rwanda does not criminalize consensual same-sex conduct or non-normative gender expression. However, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people could be arrested under article 143 of the penal code, which punishes "public indecency" with imprisonment ranging from six months to two years. On April 26, the Supreme Court dismissed a petition challenging this provision.

# Saudi Arabia

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has consolidated political and economic power, including as chairman of Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), a sovereign wealth fund that has facilitated and benefited from rights abuses. PIF investments in high-profile sports and entertainment events domestically and internationally are used to whitewash the country's abysmal human rights record. Migrant workers, including on PIF-funded projects, face widespread abuses under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system. Saudi Arabian authorities harshly repress any dissent, including by handing down long sentences or the death penalty after unfair trials on charges related to peaceful online expression.

## Public Investment Fund and Links to Abuses

After the death of King Abdullah in 2015, Mohammed bin Salman took control of key Saudi state security and political institutions and consolidated political and economic power, including as chairman and sole decision-maker of Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF).

The PIF has facilitated and benefited directly from serious human rights abuses linked to Crown Prince Mohammed. This includes the crown prince's 2017 "anti-corruption" crackdown that consisted of arbitrary detentions, abusive treatment of detainees, and the extortion of property from Saudi Arabia's elite, as well as the 2018 murder of Saudi critic and journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Capital from the PIF is being used for projects that have forcibly evicted residents, razed neighborhoods, subjected workers to serious abuses, and silenced communities. Saudi authorities forcibly evicted members of the Huwaitat community, which has inhabited Tabuk for centuries, from the planned NEOM area, arrested those who protested their evictions, and killed one protesting resident. Two residents received sentences of 50 years in prison, and three received death sentences for resisting the Saudi government's forced evictions. The Jeddah Central Development Company, a wholly-owned company of the PIF, forcibly evicted large numbers of middle- and lower-class Saudis, foreigners, and migrant

workers from their homes in Jeddah's previously vibrant working-class neighborhoods to transform the area into a luxury shopping and tourism district.

PIF investments in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere in the world also serve a powerful tool for Saudi Arabia's soft power and influence. The June 2023 framework agreement between the Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) and PIF-funded LIV Golf includes a "non-disparagement clause" that effectively silences criticism from PGA Tour officials and players of Saud Arabia's human rights record.

## Freedoms of Expression, Association, and Belief

Saudi authorities continued their campaign to crack down on peaceful social media activity. On May 29, 2024, Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism tribunal, the Specialized Criminal Court, convicted Asaad al-Ghamdi, 47, a Saudi teacher, of several criminal offenses related solely to his peaceful expression online. He is the brother of Mohammed al-Ghamdi, a retired Saudi teacher, who was sentenced to death in July 2023 based solely on his posts on X and YouTube activity.

Rights organizations urged allies of Saudi Arabia to send observers to the trial hearings of Salma al-Shehab and Nourah al-Qahtani, sentenced to 34 and 45 years respectively based solely on their peaceful social media activity. Al-Shehab's posts on X related to support for women's rights.

## Asylum Seekers, Migrants, and Migrant Workers

Between March 2022 and June 2023, Saudi border guards killed hundreds of Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers who tried to cross the southern border with Yemen. These killings would amount to a crime against humanity if committed as part of a Saudi government policy to murder migrants.

Migrant workers represent 42 percent of the country's population. Yet despite their indispensable contributions, they face widespread labor abuses across employment sectors and geographic regions, and Saudi authorities are systematically failing to protect them from and remedy these abuses. The Building and Wood Workers' International Union (BWI) filed a complaint at the International Labour Organization (ILO) against the Saudi

Arabian Government regarding the exploitative living and working conditions among Saudi-based migrant workers ahead of the December decision by FIFA to grant Saudi Arabia hosting rights for the 2034 FIFA World Cup.

These abuses are enabled by Saudi Arabia's *kafala* (sponsorship) system that ties the legal status of migrant workers to their employer. Saudi Arabia's legal and regulatory framework fails to address widespread abuses from the kafala system that grants employers' extensive control over workers' lives despite several rounds of labor reforms. Additionally, Saudi Arabia restrictions on free expression prevents workers from establishing unions and collective bargaining for better labor protections.

Governments continue to prioritize trade and other strategic interests with Saudi Arabia over human rights. The new UK government has announced the resumption of negotiations for a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council, despite ongoing concerns about the lack of transparency, oversight, and inclusion of concrete human rights protections and commitments in any agreement, particularly for migrant workers.

## Criminal Justice System

Rampant abuses have been documented in Saudi Arabia's criminal justice system undermining rule of law and international human rights standards. The counterterrorism law violates due process and fair trial rights by granting authorities wide powers to arrest and detain people without judicial oversight.

Saudi authorities continue to use overbroad and vague provisions of the notorious counterterrorism law to silence dissent and persecute religious minorities. Asaad and Mohammed al-Ghamdi, Salma al-Shehab, and Nourah al-Qahtani were all sentenced under Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism law for peacefully exercising their right to free expression online.

## Death Penalty

In April, a Saudi court upheld the death penalty sentences for two Saudi men for protest-related offenses allegedly committed as children, despite statements by Saudi Arabia's Human Rights Commission claiming that no one in Saudi Arabia will be executed for a

crime committed as a child. Yousif al-Manasif and Ali al-Mabyook, both from the eastern province where most of the country's Shi'a minority live, were between the ages of 14 and 17 when they were arrested. At least five people sentenced to death as children remain in imminent danger of execution.

## Women's Rights

Saudi Arabia does not have an anti-discrimination law. Saudi Arabia's first codified law on personal status formally enshrines male guardianship over women and includes provisions that facilitate domestic violence and sexual abuse in marriage. The government did not consult Saudi women's rights activists despite their campaigns for a Personal Status Law that would end discrimination against women. Instead, Saudi women's rights activists have faced arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, and travel bans.

The Personal Status Law requires women to obtain the permission of their male guardian, typically their fathers or brothers, to marry and married women are required to obey their husbands in a "reasonable manner." If a woman refuses without a "legitimate excuse" to have sex with her husband, move into the marital home he provides or stay overnight there, or travel with him, she loses her right to spousal maintenance (*nafaqa*) from her husband, which includes food, housing, clothing, and other "basic needs."

Men have a right to unilaterally divorce their wives, while women can only petition a court to dissolve their marriage contract on limited grounds and must "establish harm" that makes the continuation of marriage "impossible." The law does not define "harm" or what evidence can be submitted to support a case, leaving judges wide discretion to interpret the law and enforce it to maintain the status quo.

The father remains the default guardians of his children, limiting the mother's ability to participate fully in important decisions related to her child, even in cases where the parents do not live together and the court decides that the child should live with the mother. A mother can only act as guardian of her children if a court appoints her.

Women in Saudi Arabia face restrictions preventing them from moving freely in their own country and abroad without the permission of their male guardian. Male guardians and

other family members can report women to the police for being "absent" from their homes, which can lead to their arrest and forcible return home or imprisonment. Women are not allowed to leave prison without a male guardian to accompany them upon release.

Some universities require female students to show they have permission from their male guardian before they can go on field trips or stay at or leave campus. Saudi authorities allow male guardian to obtain court orders or simply notify the authorities to issue travel bans on women under their guardianship.

Non-Saudi women students on a scholarship are required to have a *mahram* (male relative) accompany them for their studies in Saudi Arabia.

## Technology and Rights

Saudi Arabia was host of the United Nations' annual Internet Governance Forum (IGF) that took place in Riyadh from December 15 to 19, 2024. Human Rights Watch alongside other rights groups called on the Saudi government to free all individuals arbitrarily detained for their online expression ahead of the IGF. It is counter to IGF values for Saudi Arabia to host the IGF, especially given that 2024's thematic focus was advancing human rights and inclusion in the digital age.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Saudi Arabia has no written laws concerning sexual orientation or gender identity, but judges use principles of uncodified Islamic law to sanction those suspected of having sexual relations outside marriage, including adultery, extramarital and homosexual sex, or other "immoral" acts.

The authorities continue to repress the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people and have eliminated discussion of gender and sexuality from the public sphere online and offline.

## Climate Change Policy and Impacts

Saudi Arabia's PIF investments in clean energy remain a miniscule proportion of those in

fossil fuels and amount to little more than greenwashing. While the PIF has made limited investment in clean energy, it has added assets in fossil fuels.

The Fund has also served as a tool of distraction from Saudi Arabia's growing contributions to the climate crisis through fossil fuel production and its role leading efforts to undermine and stymy international agreements and other efforts to meaningfully address it.

# Serbia

Attacks on journalists, delayed and inefficient war crimes prosecutions, a flawed asylum system, and intolerance and violence against LGBT people remained significant concerns in Serbia in 2024.

The state response to protests and criticism of planned lithium mining in July and August highlighted weakness in the rule of law, with arrests of activists and smear campaigns against independent media outlets by state media.

## Freedom of Media

Independent journalists were subjected to assaults, threats, including death threats and smearing by pro-government media outlets and high-ranking public officials.

Between January and September, the Independent Journalists' Association recorded 108 incidents against journalists and media outlets, of which 8 were physical attacks, 2 were attacks on property, and 55 involved threats, intimidation and harassment.

In March, the two heads of the Vojvodina Association of Independent Journalists, Dinko Gruhonjic and Ana Lalić Hegediš, were subject to threats and intimidation after speaking at a conference in Croatia. Investigative journalist Gruhonjic was the target of a viral deepfake video in March in which he appeared to be happy that he shares a first name with Croatian Fascist war criminal Dinko Šakić, resulting in two criminal complaints against Gruhonjic and several death threats. Journalist Lalić Hegediš received thousands of threats, including death threats and threats of sexual violence. Both journalists reported the incidents to the police, and police were investigating at time of writing.

In February, *N1 Belgrade* newsroom reported several death threats against its editorial staff to authorities. *N1 Belgrade* has received countless threats, including death threats, over the past decade, only a few of which have been prosecuted.

During the year, there was a surge in so-called SLAPP cases (strategic lawsuits against public participation) against journalists.

As of September, *Krik*, an investigative media outlet, was the subject of 14 defamation lawsuits, all of which it claims aim to silence its work.

In April, a Belgrade Court of Appeal judge and her husband filed civil and criminal lawsuits against *Krik* and its journalists. The couple allege the outlet violated their privacy rights when it published a profile of them in a database of judges aimed at highlighting key cases and assets for transparency purposes. All cases were pending at time of writing.

In June, the Belgrade Court of Appeal upheld a defamation verdict against *Krik* for an article published in December 2021 listing those who had sued the outlet and for a comment by the editor-in-chief in the same issue stating *Krik* was being targeted with SLAPP lawsuits aimed at silencing journalists.

## Accountability for War Crimes

Between January and August, the War Crimes Prosecutor's Office launched seven new war crimes investigations involving eight suspects, and three against unknown perpetrators. As of August, 19 cases against 37 defendants were pending before Serbian courts. Proceedings were marred by significant delays.

The High Council of Prosecution in May appointed a temporary head of war crimes prosecutions following the expiration of the seven-year mandate of acting Chief War Crimes Prosecutor Snezana Stanojkovic. A civil society group that tracks war crimes cases criticized the lack of progress on war crimes accountability under Stanojkovic's leadership.

The war crimes trial against seven Bosnian Serb ex-policemen accused of killing 1,313 Bosniaks from Srebrenica during the 1995 genocide resumed in September after an 18-month delay. The trial at the Belgrade High Court has repeatedly been postponed since its start in 2017. As of September, only two of eight hearings scheduled for 2024 had actually taken place.

The trial of Jovan Radan, former member of the Serb-led Territorial Defense force accused of wartime rape in the Vukovar area of Croatia in 1991, started at the Belgrade High Court in July.

The Belgrade Higher Court, in a retrial in July, convicted Danko Vladicic of murder of an older Bosniak couple in Brod na Drini in August 1992, sentencing him to nine years in prison.

Following a retrial that lasted more than eight years, the Belgrade Higher Court in April convicted seven and acquitted two former members of a Yugoslav Army Unit of war crimes for their involvement in deadly attacks against civilians in the Peja area of Kosovo between April and May 1999. The commander received a 20-year sentence and others lesser jail terms.

## Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants

The asylum system remained flawed, with asylum seekers facing difficulties accessing procedures, low recognition rates, and long delays. Between January and August, Serbia granted refugee status or subsidiary protection to only two people. Serbia granted temporary protection to 880, all from Ukraine.

Between January and August, Serbia registered 511 asylum seekers, and allowed 156 asylum applications to be lodged.

By August, 38 unaccompanied migrant children had been registered with Serbian authorities for the year to date. Serbia lacks formal age assessment procedures for unaccompanied children, putting older children at risk of being treated as adults instead of receiving special protection.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

LGBT people continued to face intolerance, threats, and violence. Between January and September, *Da Se Zna!* recorded 82 incidents of hate motivated incidents against LGBT people, including 28 physical attacks. The Belgarde Pride march took place without incident in September.

## People with Disabilities

Children and adults with disabilities continue to be placed in institutional care, and almost 30 percent of children with disabilities who live in institutions are not enrolled in school.

## Kosovo

Tensions continued in the north following the closure by Kosovo authorities of financial institutions, post offices, and five "parallel institutions" tied to Belgrade, sparking protests among local Serbs and international criticism.

Twenty-five years after the war, the Kosovo Specialist Chamber in The Hague delivered two judgments and continued proceedings against former Kosovo President Hashim Thaci, and Kosovo courts continued to prosecute war crimes cases.

Journalists continued to face attacks, harassment, and threats, with a poor response from authorities.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in April recommended that Kosovo become a member.

## Accountability for War Crimes

In February, the Pristina Basic Court convicted former Serbian police officer Dusko Arsić for his role in police and paramilitary ill-treatment, expulsions, and murders of Kosovo Albanian residents of Pristina in 1999. Arsić was sentenced to 13 years in prison.

The Pristina Basic Court in April, in a partial retrial in the “Drenica 1” case, acquitted Sylejman Selimi and Jahir Demaku of beating a prisoner at a Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) detention center in the village of Likovac in 1998. Their other war crimes convictions still stand.

In July, the Pristina Basic Court sentenced Muhamet Alidemaj, a former Serbian police officer, to 15 years’ imprisonment for war crimes for participating in the massacre of 130 people at Izbice in March 1999.

The Kosovo Specialist Chambers in The Hague in July found former KLA member Pjeter Shala guilty of war crimes, including the murder of one prisoner and the arbitrary detention and torture of at least 18 detainees in the Kukes Metal Factory in Kukes, Albania, between May and June 1999. The court sentenced Shala to 18 years in prison.

In September, the The Court of Appeals Panel at the Kosovo Specialist Chambers in The Hague reduced the sentence of KLA commander Salih Mustafa for a second time, to 15 years' imprisonment. Mustafa was convicted in December 2022 by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers for war crimes between 1998 and 2000, including murder, torture, and arbitrary detention.

## Accountability for Political Violence

The Pristina Basic Court in June convicted four Kosovo Serbs—Nedeljko Spasojevic, Marko Rosić, Zarko Jovanović and Dragisa Marković —for the 2018 murder of Oliver Ivanović, a Kosovo Serb opposition politician from North Mitrovica. Sentences ranged between four and 10 years. Police delay in conducting arrests after the sentencing allowed Rosić to evade justice.

## Freedom of Media

Journalists continued to be subjected to physical attacks, threats, and obstructions in their work. Between January and September, the Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AGK) recorded 38 incidents against journalists, including two attacks, five death threats and 14 cases of harassment, hate speech, or smear campaigns.

Staff of online investigative news outlet *Insajderi* received death threats following a June story identifying a man arrested by Kosovo Police for alleged fraud and money laundering.

The Mitrovica Basic Court in September sentenced a man to four months in prison for threatening a crew from the Balkans Investigative Reporting Network reporting on a proposal to build a Catholic church in the village of Gornja Klina in February.

## Women's Rights

A commission established to grant status and access to monthly funding to survivors of war-time sexual violence made slow progress, with only 2,083 of an estimated 20,000 survivors having applied by June.

A June report by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe monitoring domestic violence cases criticized court delays and failures to adhere to procedural

deadlines as well as lenient sentencing, with 78 percent of defendants receiving at most a fine or suspended sentence. The report recommended training for all judicial system actors, including specialized training for judges, prosecutors, and attorneys.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Duda Balje, member of the Kosovo parliament and chair of the parliamentary Human Rights Commission, made discriminatory comments about LGBT people during a parliamentary meeting in February. Local LGBT and human rights organizations called for her dismissal as chair. In May, the government announced plans to legalize same-sex civil unions. The legislation had yet to be introduced at time of writing.

## Asylum Seekers and Displaced Persons

Between January and August, the Kosovo Ministry of Internal Affairs registered 358 forced returns to Kosovo, the majority from Germany. Sixty-one were children. Of all forcibly returned, nine were Roma, one Bosniak, and the rest ethnic Albanian. During the same reporting period, the ministry registered 33 voluntary returns to Kosovo, and 144 asylum applications, the majority of the latter individuals from Syria.

## Accountability of International Institutions

There was no progress in providing reparations or apologies to Kosovo Roma resettled by the UN to now-closed lead contaminated camps after the 1999 war. A flawed UN mechanism to provide compensation has yet to begin operations.

# Singapore

On May 15, Lawrence Wong was sworn in as prime minister of Singapore following two decades of rule under Lee Hsien Loong. Since taking office, Wong has upheld his predecessor's policies, including the continued use of the death penalty, which drew widespread international condemnation. The home minister intensified the crackdown on anti-death penalty activists, long targets of government harassment and intimidation. Throughout the year, the Singaporean government wielded its arsenal of overly broad and repressive laws to stifle free expression and dissent.

## Criminal Justice System

While the global trend is towards abolishing the death penalty, Singapore maintains its use for a range of crimes, including drug-related offenses. This year, the government issued execution notices to individuals convicted of drug-related offenses, even as their appeals were pending, and introduced legislation that further impedes the rights of prisoners in capital cases.

In May, Singapore Home Minister K. Shanmugam announced the Post-Appeal Applications in Capital Cases Act (PACC)—a law that further curtails fair trial and due process rights of prisoners in capital cases—would come into effect. Enacted in June, the PACC severely limits prisoners' ability to appeal their convictions and contravenes the 1984 UN Safeguards guaranteeing protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty.

## Freedom of Expression

Singaporean authorities frequently use overly broad and restrictive laws to silence criticism of the government and restrict the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) gives the government broad discretionary powers to censor online content. Authorities use it to silence and intimidate independent media, opposition politicians, and civil society actors by forcing them to post subjective, government-determined "corrections" and intimidating others to self-censor. The POFMA also allows the designation of websites or webpages as

"Declared Online Locations" (DOL), which blocks the site owner from receiving any financial benefits and requires them to display a DOL notice on their website.

This year the government invoked the POFMA law against several opposition politicians, including Kenneth Jeyaretnam, secretary-general of the Reform Party, who received multiple corrections notices, including for criticizing a government-led housing project. The government also designated his website and social media profiles as DOLs.

The Hostile Information Campaigns provisions of the Foreign Interference (Counter-Measures) Act (FICA) grants the home minister broad powers to require the removal or disabling of online content, publication of mandatory messages drafted by the government, banning of apps from being downloaded in Singapore, and disclosure of information by internet and social media companies. It also allows the government to designate individuals or groups as "politically significant persons" (PSP) who can be required to follow strict limits on receiving funding and to disclose all links with foreigners. The law's broad language encompasses a wide range of ordinary activities by civil society activists, academics, and journalists who engage with non-Singaporeans.

On February 26, the authorities invoked the FICA against Singaporean citizen Chan Man Ping Philip, designating him as a PSP for showing "susceptibility" to foreign influence. The authorities have previously designated two civil society groups as PSPs and also announced on July 11 that it would designate the National Trades Union Congress due to its alleged close ties with the opposition People's Action Party. Rights groups are concerned the government may be using the law's broad provisions to curtail freedoms.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

Women and girls in Singapore experience sexual and gender-based violence and various forms of workplace discrimination, including insufficient legal protections for pregnant employees and migrant workers.

Sexual harassment in the workplace remains prevalent in Singapore. The government has not ratified the International Labour Organization Violence and Harassment Convention (C190), which would mandate comprehensive protections to end violence and harassment, including gender-based violence, at work.

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) expressed concern over rising online gender-based violence in the country, including "image-based sexual abuse." A Singaporean women's rights organization reported growing alarm among youth, particularly young girls, over image-based sexual violence amid a regional epidemic of digital sex crimes.

## Freedom of Assembly

The government tightly restricts the right to peaceful assembly through the Public Order Act (POA), which requires a police permit for any "cause-related" assembly if it is held in a public place or in a private venue if members of the public are invited. The law defines an "assembly" extremely broadly, and those who fail to obtain the required permits face criminal charges. The POA also grants the police commissioner authority to reject any permit application for an assembly or procession "directed towards a political end" if any foreigner is involved.

On February 2, about 70 people marched towards the Istana—Singapore's Presidential Office—carrying watermelon umbrellas in solidarity with the Palestinian cause. The group had letters to deliver to the then-prime minister urging him to cut ties with Israel. Organizers of the march, activists Annamalai Kokila Parvathi, Siti Amirah Mohamed Asrori, and Mossammad Sobikun Nahar, were later investigated and then charged on June 27 under the POA for organizing a public gathering without a permit.

## Human Rights Defenders

The Singaporean government intensified its efforts to target and silence human rights defenders under the guise of protecting its judicial system.

On May 8, the home minister condemned prominent anti-death penalty activists, publicly naming them in a ministerial address and accusing them of falsely portraying the criminal justice system as "stacked against drug traffickers." All those named had already been subjected to orders under the POFMA for their activism.

On May 31, the Singaporean High Court removed human rights defender and lawyer Ravi Madasamy from the roll of advocates and solicitors for making false allegations against

one of the country's former leaders. Madasamy has long been targeted by the government, the courts, and the legal establishment who said he was undermining the judiciary.

# Somalia

Somalia government military operations against the armed group Al-Shabab, which was responsible for numerous unlawful attacks, as well as inter-clan conflict, left hundreds of civilians dead and forced tens of thousands to flee. Al-Shabab, security forces, and clan militia committed sexual violence against women and girls, and widespread abuses against children. Despite some improvements in the humanitarian context, an estimated 4.4 million people were anticipated to need urgent food aid by year's end. Extreme weather patterns destroyed livelihoods and forced thousands to seek residence elsewhere.

Somalia's constitutional review process, underway for nearly a decade, resulted in tensions with the federal states, notably regarding additional powers granted to the president. The chapters of the constitution under review included provisions violating children's rights.

Tensions with Ethiopia escalated following the announcement of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Ethiopia and Somaliland. The MoU reportedly grants landlocked Ethiopia access to parts of the Somaliland coast in exchange for possible recognition of Somaliland's sovereignty. Somalia reportedly requested the exclusion of Ethiopian troops in the new African Union mission. Egypt, at odds with Ethiopia over control of the river Nile, announced it would send troops into Somalia.

Troop-contributing countries to the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), set to end in December, continued to withdraw troops as discussions on the financing of its replacement mission continued. The European Union approved ongoing support to ATMIS and renewed support to the Somali national army.

In May, the Somali government called on the United Nations Security Council to terminate the UN political mission in Somalia (UNSOM), later walking back on the timeframe. The handover of UNSOM's human rights roles and functions remain under discussion, including human rights advocacy, technical compliance with international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law, and monitoring of UN-supported forces. The mandate of the Independent Expert on Somalia was renewed by the United Nations Human Rights Council.

The government did not review the country's outdated penal code or establish a national human rights commission.

## Attacks on Civilians

Al-Shabab's attacks, using improvised explosive devices (IEDs), suicide bombings, and shelling, as well as targeted assassinations, resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths and injuries in 2024. On August 2, the armed group attacked a beach restaurant in Mogadishu, the capital, that killed 37 civilians and injured over 200.

The government's offensive against Al-Shabab led to civilian deaths, injuries, and displacement. Amnesty International found that on March 18, two strikes, supported by Turkish-made drones, killed 23 civilians, including 14 children, near Bagdad village, Lower Shabelle region, the site of heavy fighting throughout the year. The US acknowledged conducting airstrikes in support of the Somali army's operations against Al-Shabab.

Inter-clan conflict in central Somalia, notably in Galmudug state, over increasingly scarce resources escalated mid-year killing and injuring civilians and forcing thousands to flee.

Military courts continued to sentence people to death. On August 17, Puntland executed 10 people accused of Al-Shabab affiliation and killings, four of whom were children at time of the alleged offense. In March, two men were executed by firing squad, one after a court in Galgudug found him guilty of killing state-media journalist Abdikarim Ahmed Bulhan earlier in the year.

Al-Shabab fighters continued to execute individuals accused of working for the government and foreign forces.

## Displacement and Access to Humanitarian Assistance

The humanitarian situation remained dire despite some improvements due to better rainfall and humanitarian assistance.

Around half of the 350,000 people internally displaced between January and October fled conflict and insecurity, according to the UN. Tens of thousands of people were forcibly evicted, mostly by property owners, notably in Mogadishu.

Humanitarian agencies face serious challenges delivering aid due to conflict, targeted attacks on aid workers, restrictions imposed by warring parties, including arbitrary taxation and bureaucratic hurdles, and physical constraints.

## Sexual Violence

The UN continued to document incidents of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence affecting mostly internally displaced women and girls.

Somalia has not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) or the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol).

## Abuses against Children

The UN documented hundreds of incidents of grave violations against children, including killings, sexual violence and attacks on schools, primarily by Al-Shabab, but also by government forces.

Authorities detained children and sentenced them in military courts on allegations of Al-Shabab affiliation. UN experts condemned the August 17 execution of four young men who were children at the time of the alleged offenses. International law prohibits the imposition of the death penalty on child offenders.

On March 30, both houses of parliament decided to shelve, pending further consultations, proposed constitutional amendments that would lower the age of majority to 15 and possibly permit certain forms of female genital mutilation (FGM). Following significant international pressure, the parliament maintained an existing provision that banned "all forms" of female genital cutting. The provision does not define female circumcision, which may or may not be interpreted to mean the same thing as FGM.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that Somalia has one of the highest rates of FGM in the world with 99 percent of girls and women ages 15 to 49 having undergone genital cutting.

## Freedom of Expression

Regional and federal authorities harassed, intimidated, and arbitrarily detained and charged journalists and media workers.

On March 14, Abdikarin Ahmed Bulhan, a journalist with two state-run media houses, was shot dead in Abudwak, Galgaduud region.

In Mogadishu, the government froze the accounts of the Somali Journalists Syndicate (SJS), a media-rights organization, and announced criminal charges against the organization and its leadership whose staff members had previously been repeatedly detained.

Somali media organizations condemned the appointments of nine commissioners to the new media council, which they said failed to comply with the procedure under the media law to ensure independence and consultations.

## Somaliland

The authorities in Somaliland again restricted discussions on controversial issues, arresting journalists, politicians, and other perceived government critics.

In early January, the government detained three media workers, including Mohamed Abdi Sheikh, chairman of privately owned MM Somali TV, as they hosted an X space around the controversial MoU with Ethiopia and also detained social media activist Abdimalik Muse Oldon. Mohamed Abdi and Abdimalik Muse were released in February.

In September, opposition Member of Parliament Mohamed Abib Yusuf Jama was detained despite parliament rejecting a request by the attorney general's office to remove his parliamentary immunity. The Somaliland Supreme Court ordered his release on September 30.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Somalia criminalizes consensual same-sex conduct with up to three years in prison.

# South Africa

April 27 marked the 30th anniversary of democracy, human rights, and political freedom in South Africa. The country's first democratic and non-racial elections in 1994 formally ended the apartheid system. Enduring issues related to migration, compounded by anti-immigration rhetoric and xenophobia, dominated political campaigns in the May 29 general elections, arguably the most closely contested since 1994. Several candidates for political office frequently scapegoated foreign nationals, heightening the risk of xenophobic violence.

While South Africa made strides in advancing women and children's rights, including by enacting laws to ensure access to basic education and establishing a statutory body to combat gender-based violence and femicide, violence against women and girls not only remained alarmingly high, but increased.

Incidents of school children who were killed or suffered injuries from falls in pit latrines further undermined the rights to education, sanitation, safety and security, while severe food poverty affected 23 per cent of children in the country, increasing their risk to malnutrition.

## Xenophobia and the Rights of Migrants

While fewer incidents of xenophobic violence were reported in 2024 than in prior years, political candidates adopted harmful anti-immigrant rhetoric ahead of the May 29 elections. According to Xenowatch, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that documents incidents of xenophobic discrimination in South Africa, there were 59 reported incidences of xenophobic discrimination in 2024 and 2,946 individuals displaced as a result of xenophobic discrimination.

Between November 2023 and early 2024, the Scalabrini Centre and Lawyers for Human Rights, two NGOs, reported that police unlawfully arrested asylum seekers at Refugee Reception Offices across the country. Some of those arrested faced detention and deportation without full access to asylum procedures, in violation of the principle of non-refoulement under international refugee law. On May 24, the two NGOs initiated legal

action against the Department of Home Affairs for the deportation of asylum seekers. On September 13, a high court granted an interim prohibition of government officials from deporting foreign nationals who have expressed intent to apply for asylum under the Refugee Act.

## Violence Against Women and Girls

South Africa has some progressive laws aimed at protecting women's rights, but abuse against women continued to rise.

On May 24, South Africa enacted the National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Act, intended to establish a national, multi-sectoral coordinating body to address gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) and uphold the 2020 National Strategic Plan on GBVF. However, the Act is not yet operational, and shocking levels of violence against women and girls in South Africa—which is estimated to have among the highest rate of rape in the world and an estimated femicide rate that is five times the global average–continued throughout the year. There was also a disappointing lack of progress on implementation of the recommendations from the Commission for Gender Equality in its 2020 investigation report of the forced sterilization of women living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

Police crime statistics from April – June 2024, indicate an alarming increase in violence against women. The report cited 966 reported murders representing a 7.9 percent increase; 1,644 attempted murders, a 16 percent increase; 13,757 assault cases, a 6.9 percent increase; and 9,309 reported rape cases, reflecting a 0.6 percent increase compared to the same period in 2023.

## Right to Education

In September, South Africa enacted the Basic Education Amendment Act which, among other provisions, makes one year of pre-primary education compulsory, and removes other barriers to access to education for all. The new law reaffirms the ban of corporal punishment by widening its definition to include "any act that seek to belittle; humiliate, threaten, and induce fear or ridicule the dignity of a learner" and protects undocumented children's right to basic education. It empowers the minister of basic education to

formulate regulations to provide comprehensive guidelines for pregnant and parenting learners.

The legislation does not however adequately fulfil the rights of students with disabilities to free, quality inclusive education. The authorities suspended implementation of certain provisions relating to language and admission policies for three months to enable further government consultations. South Africa expressed support for a proposal at the United Nations Human Rights Council for a new treaty to strengthen the right to free education.

The 2024 Education Facility Management System report indicates that, even eight years after the expiration of the deadline to eradicate pit latrines, approximately 1,770 public schools still have both "appropriate" facilities and pit latrines, while 287 public schools rely solely on pit latrines. The continued use of pit latrines in schools violates learners' rights to quality education, water and sanitation, health, safety, and security. Reports of tragic incidents of children falling into pit latrines have persisted. On April 18, a three-year-old boy died after falling into a pit latrine at a daycare in East London. The government has pledged to eradicate pit latrines by March 2025.

## Child Malnutrition

A 2024 UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) report lists South Africa among 20 countries accounting for 65 percent of children living in severe food poverty globally. The report notes that 23 percent of children in the country are classified in this category and are at risk of life-threatening malnutrition, stunting and cognitive delays. The minister of basic education cancelled a R10 billion (approximately US $550 million) school feeding scheme tender across 19,000 schools, citing corruption and inefficiency.

## Older People's Rights

Minimal increases to the amounts provided as part of social security entitlements for older persons have left millions with income levels below half of what they would earn if they worked 40 hours per week at the national minimum wage. Those requiring full-time care and support at home continued to face insurmountable financial barriers to accessing such services. Concurrently, provincial government budget cuts threatened to further

diminish older people's already limited access to community-based care and support services.

## Climate Change

On July 23, President Cyril Ramaphosa signed the Climate Change Act, which aims to establish a robust response to climate change and facilitate a just energy transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy, to align South Africa with its commitments under the 2015 Paris Agreement. The president is yet to proclaim a date for the law to be made operational, rendering its mechanisms unenforceable and key timelines uninitiated.

## Rights to Health and Social Security

The right to health is significantly undermined by numerous challenges, including an overburdened public healthcare system, and a shortage of medical professionals. The country operates a two-tier and unequal healthcare system that creates disparities between those who can afford the cost of private insurance and those reliant on public services. The National Health Insurance Act, signed into law on May 16, amid reported threats of litigation to contest its validity, purports to address these disparities and ensure universal healthcare coverage for all individuals, irrespective of socioeconomic status, as guaranteed by the Constitution.

## Repression of Human Rights Defenders

Abahlali baseMjondolo, a movement comprising urban shack dwellers advocating for land, housing, and dignity, has faced significant threats and violence from both state and non-state actors. According to a 2024 report by Amnesty International South Africa, 25 activists and members of this movement have been killed since its inception, with many of these deaths directly linked to their human rights work, aimed at curtailing their activism and whistleblowing efforts at local government level.

## Foreign Policy and International Justice

As a member of the UN Human Rights Council, South Africa worked with Australia, Chile, and Finland to present the council's first ever resolution affirming the rights of intersex persons. South Africa continued to play a leadership role on several other key issues,

including on combatting racism. It supported the renewal of the HRC's Fact-Finding Mission on Sudan and resolutions on the Occupied Palestinian Territory (abstaining on other contested country resolutions), and engaged to strengthen an EU-led council resolution on Afghanistan, particularly highlighting the need for further efforts to advance accountability for past and ongoing international crimes.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered provisional measures on January 26, March 28 and May 24, in South Africa's case alleging that Israel is violating the Genocide Convention. The court adopted "provisional measures," or binding orders, that include requiring Israel to prevent genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, enable the provision of basic services and humanitarian assistance, and prevent and punish incitement to commit genocide. Public hearings on South Africa's most recent request for provisional measures, filed on 10 May, were held on May 16 and 17. Addressing the UN General Assembly on September 24, President Ramaphosa reiterated South Africa's commitment to international solidarity with the people of Palestine. He stated, "We South Africans know what apartheid looks like…We will not remain silent and watch as apartheid is perpetrated against others."

# South Korea

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) experienced a tumultuous year of escalating tensions with North Korea and an increasingly acrimonious political environment that resulted in the impeachment of President Yoon Seok-yeol following his unexpected and short-lived imposition of martial law on December 3. Overall, South Korea's human rights record remained positive. However, several human rights concerns persisted, including widespread discrimination against women and girls; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people; older people; and people with disabilities. Media also documented a dramatic rise in digital sex crimes committed against women and girls.

## Freedoms of Expression and Assembly

Although South Korea in 2024 enjoyed a relatively free media environment and a diverse civil society, the government's increasing use of criminal defamation laws and the National Security Law (NSL) to limit scrutiny of its actions raised concerns over press freedoms and the state of democratic space in the country. Before President Yoon's December attempt to impose martial law, his administration used criminal defamation suits to retaliate against his critics at a markedly higher rate than his predecessors. The December 3 martial law decree contained sweeping restrictions on media, freedom of expression, and the rights to association and assembly. On December 3, Yoon ordered security officials to arrest key political leaders and occupy the offices of many newspapers and broadcasters.

The NSL continued to be used to violate basic rights. It allows the government to prosecute those who own or disseminate materials alleged to be North Korean propaganda. In August, the police raided the People's Democracy Party headquarters, alleging violations of the NSL. In November 2023, a South Korean court sentenced a poet to 14 months in prison for writing a poem praising North Korea. In his December martial law declaration, President Yoon labeled his political opponents "anti-state forces," a vague and overbroad term used in the NSL, echoing rhetoric he has used previously.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

Structural discrimination against women and girls is endemic in South Korea. The *Economist* magazine's "Glass Ceiling Index" again named South Korea the worst place to

be a working woman among 29 OECD countries studied in 2024. Women receive approximately 30 percent less compensation than male counterparts and only hold 13 percent of board seats nationwide.

The government failed to adequately address rampant digital sex crimes, including tackling gender inequality as a root cause. In August, media outlets reported on an explosion of cases in which nonconsensual deepfake sexual images predominantly targeting girls and women were generated and disseminated on the messaging platform Telegram, which prompted protests and rallies.

In May, an appeal court rejected an appeal to unblock the Women on Web (WoW) website, highlighting the difficulties women and girls face in accessing safe and affordable abortions despite the decriminalization of abortion in 2021. Without clear legal frameworks ensuring access to abortion care, South Korea fails to safeguard the rights of women and girls.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Lawmakers have not enacted comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation protecting LGBT people and other marginalized groups. In a significant victory in July, the Supreme Court affirmed that the country's National Health Insurance Service must extend dependent benefits to same-sex partners.

The appointment of Ahn Chang-ho, a former Constitutional Court justice known for his anti-LGBT stance as the next chairman of the National Human Rights Commission of Korea threatens the recognition of LGBT rights. Ahn opposes a comprehensive anti-discrimination law that would provide legal protections for all marginalized groups, including LGBT people.

## Policy on Human Rights in North Korea

South Korea's policy on North Korean human rights is politicized domestically and influenced by broad geopolitical interests and tensions with Pyongyang. In January, Kim Jong Un announced that North Korea had abandoned its longstanding ambitions for reunification. In August, President Yoon maintained his call for "freedom-based unification" with the North, although in June, South Korea suspended the Panmunjom

Declaration, a key military agreement, over heightened tensions after North Korea sent thousands of balloons carrying garbage over the border.

In August, President Yoon announced the creation of a North Korean human rights fund to support organizations that promote human rights in the country. In May, the Yoon administration designated July 14 as "North Korean Defectors' Day," though a recent survey has shown that nearly 70 percent of North Korean escapees still struggle to make a living and half of them feel that discrimination has negatively impacted their economic status. On the inauguration of "North Korean Defectors' Day," President Yoon pledged to offer financial incentives to companies that hire North Korean escapees.

In March, a South Korea-based non-profit sued the North Korean government in a South Korean court for a decades-long campaign that used false promises, via the "Paradise on Earth" repatriation program, to lure ethnic Koreans to the country.

## Workers' Rights

There are many gaps in protections in South Korea's labor rights landscape, especially non-unionized employees and migrant workers. Despite being slated to chair the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s executive body, the South Korean government has not ratified key conventions and protocols of the ILO, including Convention No. 190 on violence and harassment in the world of work.

In February, doctors resigned or went on strike, protesting policies that would increase medical student quotas, but failed to address low wages and grueling working conditions. These strikes, which continued throughout the year, have disrupted critical services, raised concerns about worker exploitation and the government's failure to prioritize labor protections.

Migrant workers in South Korea face particularly harsh living and working conditions. Although foreign workers are reportedly nearly three times more likely to die in work-related accidents than their South Korean counterparts, in 2024, the government cut off support for migrant support centers, as the number of foreign workers in the country reached an all-time high in 2023.

## Environment and Human Rights

In a landmark ruling in August, the Constitutional Court of Korea ruled that the country's climate legislation was insufficient for safeguarding the rights of future generations in the context of the global climate crisis. The ruling was the first of its kind in Asia.

# South Sudan

Authorities failed to meet conditions to hold general elections scheduled for December 2024, and postponed elections for another two years. The implementation of the 2018 peace deal and of reforms was slow, fueled violence and perpetuated rights abuses. The government launched the Tumaini initiative peace talks with non-signatories to the 2018 peace deal in Kenya.

Authorities severely restricted the rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, and movement. Journalists, activists, critics, and political opposition members faced intimidation, arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture and other ill-treatment. The parliament approved a law retaining broad powers for the abusive National Security Service (NSS), despite efforts by some lawmakers to review its most contentious provisions. It also approved legislation for truth and reparations processes but failed to establish the Hybrid Court.

Conflict between armed groups in Upper Nile and southern Central Equatoria led to displacement of civilians and serious abuses. Intercommunal violence in parts of Warrap, Abyei, Northern Bar El Ghazal, and Jonglei intensified.

The humanitarian situation remained dire, driven by years of conflict, intercommunal violence, food insecurity, and the climate crisis. The arrival of hundreds of thousands fleeing conflict in Sudan, including South Sudanese refugee returnees, Sudanese, and other nationalities, compounded the crisis. Millions faced high levels of food insecurity. According to UNOCHA, climate change-induced events, like floods, affected at least 890,000 people. Attacks against aid operations continued; at least nine aid workers were killed.

## Political Developments

The government restricted the space for political parties and members of the opposition groups to campaign in the capital and elsewhere in the country.

The obstacles to political space included the requirement that parties and civil society obtain permission from the NSS for public events and the government's failure to set up key institutions, such as the Political Parties Council which should register and oversee operations of parties.

On May 25, Salva Kiir was endorsed as his party's presidential candidate. He warned that an extension of the election timetable would cause a return to conflict.

The Tumaini talks were launched in May, with the goal of rebooting the 2018 peace deal, expanding the government and addressing the root cause of conflicts.

In July, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) withdrew from the Tumaini peace initiative citing concerns that "it dealt with matters that were already agreed in the Revitalized Peace Agreement and accordingly have gone beyond its remit."

The National Salvation Front led by Thomas Cirillo Swaka continued an insurgency campaign in parts of Central Equatoria with abuses against civilians and refused to participate in the Tumaini talks citing security concerns and a lack of consultation. In June, Major General Kohn Kenyi Lotio, NAS deputy chief of staff, broke away to form a separate faction, citing poor leadership.

On September 13, the government announced the postponement of elections, citing a lack of preparations and enacted a new timeline to address outstanding issues such as unification of forces, national census, voter registration,a new constitution, and judicial reforms. On September 22, the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) the body that monitors the peace deal endorsed the decision but key international partners abstained from the vote.

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan noted that delaying elections would compound the country's human rights crisis if leaders do not change course.

## Restrictions on Civic and Political Space

The NSS continued to unlawfully detain perceived government critics and severely restricted rights. Victims of NSS abuses have no credible, far less effective, avenues to seek redress.

On July 3, a parliamentary majority passed amendments to the 2014 National Security Service Act retaining the agency's powers of arrest without a warrant. President Kiir neither signed nor sent the law back to parliament within the stipulated 30-day period, so by default the law came into effect, thereby concluding a reform process introduced by the 2015 and 2018 peace deals. The NSS deployed a heavy presence, harassed journalists, and detained activists at the parliamentary sitting on the law.

On June 29, police and NSS agents in Jonglei state detained a photojournalist with the state-run South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation for participating in protests about the cost of living and nonpayment of civil servant salaries. A court released him on July 19 due to lack of evidence.

On September 6, the NSS released Kalisto Lado, the former mayor of Juba having held him for five months in incommunicado detention at the NSS detention facilities known as the Blue House. Authorities had charged him with terrorism and publishing false information among other offences, but never presented him in court.

On September 1, the NSS shutdown the annual general assembly of the South Sudan Doctors Union without providing a reason. On September 3, the NSS gave the union a list of requirements to fulfil including to not discuss, "controversial issues" and to supply a list of all attendees. The Union was allowed to meet in October after meeting the NSS demands.

On October 2, Kiir dismissed Akol Kor Kuc as director general of the NSS internal security bureau.

Between November 7 and 11, the new leadership released at least 16 detainees including Michael Wetnhialic, a political activist detained since March and Morris Mabior Awikjiok, a South Sudanese critic and former refugee, whom they had continued to hold in violation of

the justice minister directives in June and a court order in August to release him. Awikjiok, was abducted from Kenya, allegedly by Kenyan and South Sudanese security agents, in February 2023 and forcibly disappeared by South Sudanese authorities until April 2024, when they presented him in court on charges of the bailable offense of criminal defamation against then director of the NSS, Akol Koor Kuc.

## Attacks against Civilians

In a May report, UNMISS noted that the government's counter-insurgency operations in 2023 against the armed group National Salvation Front (NAS), in parts of Central Equatoria resulted in 60 civilian victims (28 killed, eight injured, and 24 subjected to conflict related sexual violence), and the targeting of civilians perceived as supporters of NAS.
In August the United Nations noted that abductions by NAS and other armed groups in parts of Central Equatoria state reportedly for the purpose of forced recruitment had increased.

In February, Warrap state government enacted the Green Book which introduces death by firing squad as a penalty for offences such as murder and rape. Between February and July, the UN documented 41 extrajudicial executions of suspected criminals by state authorities and security forces. The state also has not ensured accountability for past summary executions including that of eight suspected criminals documented by Human Rights Watch in 2021.

## Children's Rights

South Sudan has one of the world's highest proportion of out-of-school children, with three in every five children not going to school. In March, the government closed all schools for two weeks in response to extreme heat waves, citing concerns for "serious health hazards." School closures interrupted schooling for over 2.1 million children.

In June, a girl, who reportedly was 14 years old, was married in a highly publicized child marriage that contravenes South Sudan's laws protecting children from child marriage.

The UN Secretary General's Annual report on children and armed conflict published in June noted that in 2023, all parties to the conflict committed grave violations against children

including recruitment and use of 152 children, abduction of 32 children and sexual violence against 4 girls.

## Accountability and Justice

In March, the UN Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan.

The Action Plan for the Armed Forces on Addressing Conflict-related Sexual Violence in South Sudan was renewed for three years but its implementation stalled as the army did not nominate members to the implementation committee.

In September, parliament enacted bills to establish the Commission for Truth Reconciliation and Healing and the Compensation and Reparations Authority to advance justice and accountability for victims of abuses committed since war broke out in 2013.

The African Union Commission has the responsibility under the 2018 peace agreement to establish the Hybrid Court for South Sudan, but it failed to move ahead with the court's creation or press the South Sudanese authorities to help it establish the court.

# Spain

Increasing numbers of migrants and asylum seekers died at sea trying to reach Spain, and government coordination to receive, relocate, and integrate arriving people was insufficient. Poverty increased marginally and overly broad exclusions from key social security programs persisted despite some improvements. Promises to create sexual violence crisis centers nationwide, improve access to abortion, and establish an independent anti-discrimination body were slow to be realized.

## Migration and Asylum

According to the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), by mid-November almost 54,200 migrants and asylum seekers had arrived irregularly by sea to Spain (the majority, almost 53,800, arriving in the Canary Islands), and around 400 people by land. A migrant rights group estimated that 5,054 people, including 50 children, died at sea between Africa and Spain during the first five months of the year. This represented a five-fold increase in deaths compared to a similar period in 2023.

The increase in people arriving by sea contributed to tensions between regional authorities in the Canary Islands and the central government. In July, negotiations broke down on reforming the Law on Foreigners to require regional authorities to accept migrant children and young people relocated from the Canary Islands. In September, a court provisionally suspended a new protocol announced by regional authorities that the regional prosecutor's office had argued could place children at increased risk of rights violations.

Spain's human rights ombudsperson expressed concern about the lack of school places for migrant children arriving in the Canary Islands, with local authorities saying that they were overwhelmed by demand. A June decision by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child found administrative processes impeding school registration in Melilla constituted *de facto* discrimination. Investigative journalists found multiple municipalities in Catalonia made it difficult for migrants to register with local authorities, affecting access to health care and education.

In September, governing coalition parties revived efforts to regularize the legal status of some 500,000 undocumented migrants.

## Poverty and Inequality

Official data published in February showed 26.5 percent of the population was "at risk of poverty or social exclusion" in 2023, with 9 percent facing "severe material or social deprivation." Both rates increased in relation to the previous year. Detailed analysis showed that single-parent households, third country nationals, and unemployed people were most likely to be at risk of poverty, and found a persistent regional divide with southern regions and the Canary Islands experiencing higher rates.

The government improved the Minimum Vital Income (IMV) social security program by taking a more inclusive approach to application processes, making a child-related complementary benefit easier to access, and raising levels of support. The Inclusion Ministry also launched a plan, working with civil society intermediaries, to improve advice to people eligible for the IMV. The program continued to exclude most people aged 18 - 22 and people without one year's continuous legal residence. Research showed low take-up among eligible *gitano* (Roma) people.

The independent financial authority and unions alike criticized the government for insufficiently addressing "non take-up," or the gap between people eligible for a benefit and those claiming and receiving it. One NGO filed a complaint with the European Committee of Social Rights on the IMV's non-compliance with Spain's social rights obligations.

An estimated 4,500 people, including 1,800 children, remained cut off from electric supply in the Cañada Real informal settlement near Madrid. The European Committee of Social Rights reached a decision on their complaint in September, but had not made it public at time of writing.

## Women's Rights

The 2022 so-called "Yes Means Yes" law reforming sexual consent legislation continued to have mixed effect. In June, the Supreme Court ruled in a key case that "stealthing," or

removing a condom during sex without the partner's knowledge, constituted a crime of sex without consent.

Courts continued to reduce sentences for some people convicted of sexual offenses through a controversial loophole in the 2022 consent law. Reports indicated that as many as 1,400 people had sentences reduced by March, including a man convicted in a 2016 gang rape case that sparked national outrage and prompted the legal reform.

Despite dedicated central government funding for 24-hour crisis centers for people experiencing sexual violence, reports in June indicated that only 10 of the planned 52 centers nationwide had opened. Subsequently, the Equality Ministry set a year-end deadline for all of Spain's autonomous communities to set them up.

Despite a 2023 law removing obstacles to accessing abortion, research showed that several autonomous communities still did not provide abortion services in public health centers, or only did so under restrictive circumstances.

## Rule of law

The main governing and opposition parties agreed a deal to renew the Council of the Judiciary and appoint new members, ending a five year impasse that had been criticized by the European Commission.

In May, Parliament passed a law granting amnesty to acts between 2012 and 2023 relating to criminal, administrative, and accounting offenses in the context of Catalan independence. Although the law ended investigations and prosecutions of arguably protected acts of expression and assembly, it also provided an amnesty to politicians accused of financial impropriety and to most law enforcement officials accused of excessive use of force. Concerns remained about its inconsistent implementation by the judiciary.

The government revived modest plans to reform the widely-criticized 2015 public security law which restricts freedoms of expression and of assembly, unjustifiably penalizes some vulnerable groups, and enables rights-violating pushbacks at Spain's borders. The proposed reforms however, appear, limited to offences related to expression.

In September, an investigating judge shelved a complaint of torture in 1975 under the Franco dictatorship. The case was the first real test of how a 2022 legal reform might unblock a 1977 amnesty for crimes under the dictatorship.

## Right to Life

More than 2,000 people died due to extreme temperatures. More than 95 percent of those deaths occurred among people aged 65 and older, but despite updating its heatwave action plan setting out key actions for public health and social services bodies, the government did not collect data on extreme heat's impacts on people with disabilities. It remains unclear how many of those who died from extreme heat were people with disabilities.

Flash flooding in October left more than 220 people dead, raising grave concerns about authorities' emergency preparedness and protection or evacuation plans, including for older people and people with disabilities. As of mid-November, official data showed that 63 percent of those killed were 60 or older. No data was provided on people with disabilities.

## Criminalization of Sex Work

Spain continues to criminalize many activities associated with sex work, prompting human rights organizations to push for full decriminalization of consensual adult sex work.

## Disability Rights

In January, parliament approved a constitutional amendment on the rights of people with disabilities, long advocated for by disability rights groups. The change replaced outdated language about people with disabilities with a legal framing centered on personal autonomy and inclusion. The government followed up in May with broader public consultation to harmonize national law with the constitutional amendment.

## Racism, Discrimination, and Intolerance

Civil society groups urged the government to establish without delay an Independent Authority for Equal Treatment and Non-Discrimination, promised in a 2022 law. The

government informed the European Commission that it would be in place by end of the year.

Anti-racism campaigners and civil society organizations called for more concerted action to tackle racism in football matches, and address the ongoing use of "blackface" in nativity and Epiphany celebrations in various parts of the country.

Research showed persistent structural discrimination against members of the *gitano* ethnic group in education, housing, and access to online government services.

Victims and campaigners drew attention to relatively high levels of racial profiling by Spanish police. One police force shared findings from a pilot project to address the abusive practice.

# Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan politics changed course in September, when Anura Kumara Dissanayake of the left-wing National People's Power (NPP) alliance was elected president, replacing Ranil Wickremesinghe. Dissanayake promised more equitable economic policies and pledged to address some longstanding human rights concerns including by fighting corruption and abolishing the abusive Prevention of Terrorism Act.

However, like previous presidents, he has not supported accountability for large-scale violations that occurred during Sri Lanka's 1983-2009 civil war between the government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In parliamentary elections on November 14, Dissanayake's NPP won a large parliamentary majority.

Sri Lanka's economic crisis became acute in 2022, after the government defaulted on its foreign debt, causing the number of people below the World Bank's extreme poverty line of US$2.15 a day to double to nearly 26 percent of the population. The United Nations found that the proportion of children suffering from stunting had increased. Many families struggled to access goods and services essential for their rights to education and health that the state previously provided.

In October, the UN Human Rights Council extended for one year the mandate of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to monitor and report on human rights violations in Sri Lanka and collect evidence of alleged crimes committed during the country's civil war to support future national and international prosecutions.

## Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

Two years after protests broke out over the economic emergency, some macroeconomic indicators had stabilized but millions continued to suffer acute harms to their economic, social, and cultural rights. The crisis was triggered by economic mismanagement by political leaders, according to a Supreme Court ruling. The International Monetary Fund

(IMF) linked its $3 billion bailout to governance reform and measures to increase government revenue and control expenditure.

However, the policies pursued by the Wickremesinghe administration under the IMF program shifted the burden of recovery largely onto people with low incomes, eliminating subsidies and increasing regressive sales taxes. Many struggled to obtain their livelihoods and other rights amid high inflation and declining incomes. They found it difficult to access and afford health and education services – which had historically been strong in Sri Lanka – because of cuts to public spending and low government revenues. The IMF program includes a "social spending floor," requiring that 0.6 percent of GDP be spent on social security programs, but that is less than developing countries' average of 1.6 percent.

## Accountability and Justice

In October, the UN Human Rights Council extended by one year the mandate of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to monitor and report on human rights violations in Sri Lanka, and collect evidence of alleged crimes committed during the country's civil war to support future judicial accountability processes. This includes abuses linked to a violent uprising by Dissanayake's party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which ended in the late 1980s after thousands of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings by the security forces.

The 1983-2009 civil war between the government and the LTTE was marked by grave violations by both sides, but successive governments have refused to acknowledge the scale of crimes committed and shielded alleged perpetrators in the security forces from accountability. In May, the UN human rights office issued a report criticizing ongoing human rights violations and calling for international investigations and prosecutions as well as other accountability measures to address conflict-era abuses, including unresolved cases of enforced disappearance.

The Office on Missing Persons, set up by the government in 2017 to trace "disappeared" people, made almost no progress. An April UN Human Rights Committee report criticized the agency's appointment of "individuals implicated in past human rights violations" and its "interference in the prosecution of such cases."

The Wickremesinghe administration's proposal to create another body to investigate wartime abuses – the Commission for Truth, Unity and Reconciliation – replicated previous failed efforts, ignored the needs of victims, and fell far short of meeting Sri Lanka's international legal obligations. It was apparently designed to deflect international pressure over the lack of accountability for atrocity crimes and was widely rejected by victims' groups. Its proposed scope excludes widespread abuses committed during the JVP uprisings.

The Wickremesinghe government continued to target those campaigning for truth and accountability, as well as Tamils commemorating those who died or went missing in the civil war. In May, four people were detained for seven days for holding a ceremony to remember civilian suffering at the end of the war. Victims and their families were subjected to surveillance, intimidation, false allegations, violence, and arbitrary arrests.

## Freedoms of Expression and Assembly

Civil space was restricted by repressive laws and arbitrary actions by police and security agencies, particularly in predominantly Tamil resident areas in the north and east by the Wickremasinghe administration.

The government required civil society organizations to be registered with the NGO Secretariat, which is part of the Ministry of Public Security, and were subjected to intrusive restrictions. Human rights defenders and members of civil society organizations said they are closely monitored by intelligence services, and subjected to harassment, intimidation, and interference in their financing, particularly in the north and east.

The Online Safety Act, adopted in January, purportedly provides protections against online harassment, abuse and fraud, but creates broad and vague speech-related offenses punishable by prison terms of up to five years. The law establishes an "Online Safety Commission," appointed by the president, that can decide what online speech is "false" or "harmful," remove content, restrict and prohibit internet access, and prosecute individuals and organizations.

The UN human rights office said the Online Safety Act "could potentially criminalize nearly all forms of legitimate expression, creating an environment that has a chilling effect on

freedom of expression." Google, Apple, and Meta called the bill a "draconian system to stifle dissent" and warned it "could undermine the potential growth of Sri Lanka's digital economy." President Dissanayake has pledged to amend the law.

Other repressive legislation proposed by the Wickremesinghe administration included a new broadcasting law, which UN experts said could be used to "suppress dissenting voices," a counterterrorism law which according to the UN "grants wide powers to the police – and to the military – to stop, question and search, and to arrest and detain people, with inadequate judicial oversight," and the Non-Governmental Organization Supervision and Registration Bill, which would further restrict civil society space. However, these were not adopted before parliament was dissolved following the presidential election.

## Counter Terrorism Laws

The Wickremesinghe government continued to use the draconian and abusive Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) to target perceived opponents, especially Tamils and Muslims, with threats and arbitrary detention. According to figures provided to the UN by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, between January 2023 and April 2024 there were 46 cases of arrests and detentions under the PTA, although the government acknowledged only nine cases over a similar period.

Since its introduction in 1979 the PTA has enabled abuses including arbitrary detention and torture due to provisions allowing for extended administrative detention, limited judicial oversight, and convictions based on confessions to the police. Like previous presidents, Dissanayake has pledged to abolish the PTA.

## Freedom of Religion

Government agencies continued to appropriate Hindu and Muslim religious sites and lands occupied by Tamil and Muslim communities, on a variety of pretexts, in some cases to convert them into Buddhist temples. In particular, the government's Department of Archaeology identified longstanding Hindu temples as ancient Buddhist sites, and the army constructed Buddhist monuments at Hindu temples while Hindu worshippers were

denied access. Eight Hindu worshippers were arrested by police while engaging in festival rituals in March, detained for more than 10 days, and allegedly abused.

## Drug Policy

In December 2023 the government launched operation "Yukthiya" to combat the "drug menace." As of May 2024, over 100,000 people had been arrested, in many cases without any apparent evidence. The UN reported numerous allegations of torture and ill treatment and said that hundreds were sent for detention without trial in military-run "rehabilitation" centers, where there were longstanding allegations of abuse.

# Sudan

Conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) continued with the warring parties, in particular the RSF, committing war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other violations of international humanitarian law.

The conflict has provoked one of the world's biggest humanitarian catastrophes, with famine confirmed in the largest displacement camp in Darfur in August and looming in other regions. Sudan reached the world's highest level of internal displacement, over 10.8 million people as of September, including 8.1 million displaced since 2023. As of September, over 25 million people faced acute food insecurity, yet only about half of the humanitarian response plan was funded. More than 17 million children are out of school. People with disabilities faced additional challenges, given the limited humanitarian response.

The conflict spread to North Darfur and to Sudan's southeastern states, with fighting persisting in Khartoum, Bahri, and Omdurman. From April, the RSF conducted large-scale attacks in and around El Fasher, North Darfur. In June, the RSF also took over Sinja, Sinnar state. From late September the SAF and allies launched offensives in Khartoum and Darfur.

The RSF and allies committed widespread unlawful killings, including mass executions, sexual violence, targeted civilian property, and repeatedly used heavy explosive weapons in densely populated areas. The SAF and allied forces indiscriminately bombed populated areas and deliberately destroyed civilian infrastructure, committed acts of sexual violence and summary executions, torture of detainees, and mutilated bodies.

Both parties willfully obstructed aid. The country's health system has been decimated, with repeated attacks and incursions into hospitals as well as ongoing occupations of healthcare.

Both parties have violently attacked, harassed, and unlawfully detained local volunteers. These violations and crimes occurred in a context of impunity given the parties' ongoing failure to hold their forces accountable.

The United States and European Union imposed sanctions against entities fueling the conflict and individuals responsible for abuses. The United Kingdom sanctioned six entities but no individuals. The United Nations and African Union's respective security councils passed resolutions calling for civilian protection plans; at time of writing, neither had resulted in concrete steps to deploy a protection force. The International Criminal Court (ICC) investigations in Darfur continued. The UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) for the Sudan released its first report in September, and had its mandate extended by the UN Human Rights Council in October.

## Conflict and Abuses in Khartoum

The capital, Khartoum, remained an epicenter of fighting. Both the RSF and SAF carried out attacks using explosive weapons in populated areas. According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), the international data gathering organization, 110 artillery fire incidents were recorded in August alone.

The Sudan Doctors Union said an airstrike on a market in an RSF-controlled area south of the capital left at least 46 dead on September 10; the SAF and the RSF exchanged blame on the incident. In SAF-controlled parts of Omdurman, shelling, reportedly by the RSF, impacted two healthcare facilities in June and August, killing at least three people. Another reported RSF shelling on September 23 hit a market in Omdurman, killing at least 15 civilians according to SAF aligned health officials.

Human Rights Watch verified two videos posted on pro-SAF accounts in January and March showing drones attacking unarmed people in civilian clothes in Bahri, then under RSF's control; the two incidents killed at least one, possibly two people, and injured four or five others.

Both warring parties have deliberately targeted local responders through intimidation, unlawful detentions, violent attacks, and other abuses. Dozens of local responders were killed. The RSF have in several instances sexually assaulted local responders.

## Conflict and Abuses in Darfur

From April, North Darfur experienced intense bouts of fighting. The RSF and allied militias first attacked villages near El Fasher, the state capital. At least 43 villages were burned by June. They then imposed a siege on areas under their control around El Fasher, still in place at time of writing, contributing to a catastrophic humanitarian situation.

The fighting pitting the RSF and allied militias, against the SAF and joint forces from Darfuri armed groups, has killed hundreds and forced tens of thousands of civilians to flee. The parties have engaged in heavy fighting in and around the Abu Shouk internally displaced people's camp in northwestern El Fasher. On June 8, at least one mortar projectile and two other explosive weapons hit a volunteer-run emergency clinic injuring four or five people inside, including a child.

Thousands of houses have been burnt in the city. Following heavy fighting on May 22, houses southwest of Abu Shouk camp were burned, apparently by the RSF. Human Rights Watch was able to geolocate videos of RSF forces by the blaze in residential areas.

The warring parties have repeatedly shelled, bombed and in the case of the RSF, targeted, healthcare facilities.

On June 8, the RSF attacked MSF-supported South Hospital, a key emergency care health facility, forcing its closure, an incident which amounts to a war crime. The forces also looted medical supplies and equipment. The hospital was hit at least four times by explosive weapons from May 25 to June 3 alone, killing a total of 2 patients and injuring 14.

In May, the AU Peace and Security Council requested that the High-Level Panel on the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan with the new AU special envoy for the prevention of genocide develop a civilian protection strategy.

In June, the UN Security Council tasked the UN Secretary-General with providing options on civilian protection, as international and Sudanese groups increasingly called for a physical protection force in Sudan.

The SAF reportedly carried out airstrikes in multiple RSF controlled territories in Darfur, leaving civilian casualties.

## Conflict and Abuses in Other Parts of Sudan

The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) killed scores of civilians, and injured, raped, and abducted many others in waves of attacks in Habila and Fayu, two towns in Sudan's South Kordofan state, between December 2023 to March 2024. Satellite imagery shows signs of looting and burning in Habila and Fayu, and apparently deliberate fire damage in four other villages. Both towns appear to have since been abandoned. These atrocities, which mostly targeted ethnic Nuba residents, amount to war crimes. Tens of thousands of people fled their homes as a result.

## Willful Obstruction of Humanitarian Assistance, Attacks on Aid

The warring parties have willfully obstructed aid movement in violation of international humanitarian law. International humanitarian presence in the conflict-affected areas remained minimal. UN experts accused both forces in June of using starvation as a weapon of war.

Authorities affiliated with SAF including its military intelligence in particular, have imposed a multitude of arbitrary bureaucratic restrictions that have hampered the work of humanitarian organizations and their ability to reach those in need. In September, the Sudan NGO forum said that between August and September, "nearly 7 million people could not access humanitarian assistance due to access constraints, including arbitrary denials." The UN conducted its first mission into Greater Khartoum, reaching Omdurman which was partially taken over by SAF in early 2024, in March.

The SAF-aligned authorities imposed a de facto blockade on medical supplies in RSF-controlled areas of Khartoum. The RSF's ongoing presence and incursion into hospitals

and widespread looting of aid, prevented civilians from accessing aid. MSF suspended its activities in the Turkish Hospital in Khartoum following repeated violent incidents at the hospital and ongoing obstruction.

Both parties have prevented aid from reaching civilians in Darfur.

On August 1, the Famine Review Committee determined that famine was happening in North Darfur's Zamzam camp, which hosts an estimated 400,000 displaced people including many fleeing from El Fasher.

In July, MSF condemned the blockage of its trucks, two by the RSF, in separate locations in Darfur. In August, following US-led talks in Geneva, the SAF aligned authorities agreed to open a key border crossing with Chad for three months. Since February, they had denied authorization to the UN to use the crossing. In September, the Security Council reiterated calls for unfettered access to North Darfur amid ongoing aid blockage by both SAF and RSF.

## Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

Sexual violence primarily against women and girls remained widespread.

The RSF subjected women and girls in areas under their control in Khartoum, Bahri, and Omdurman to widespread sexual violence, and to forced and child marriages. Sexual violence by SAF was reported as they took over parts of Omdurman in early 2024.

The Strategic Initiative for Women in Horn of Africa (SIHA), a regional women rights group, reported that the RSF employed sexual violence as an "instrument of war" in Al Gezira state in central Sudan following the RSF takeover of the state in December 2023. The UN FFM reported similar trends of rape and gang rape by the RSF in Nyala and Zalingei, capital of South Darfur.

Survivors' access to urgently needed post-rape care and support has been severely hampered by warring parties' attacks on health care and on local responders, as well as the ongoing aid obstruction.

## Torture, Ill-Treatment and Other Grave Abuses Against Detainees

Both the SAF and the RSF have mistreated detainees in a context of widespread unlawful detention and enforced disappearances of hundreds. The UN FFM for the Sudan said both warring parties are committing widespread arbitrary detention, using unofficial locations as detention sites. Human Rights Watch analyzed videos posted between August 2023 and July 2024 showing the RSF and the SAF, and allied forces, executing prisoners, torturing, and ill-treating them. In the case of the SAF, the videos also showed the forces mutilating bodies.

## Refugees and Migrants

By September 2024, the conflict in Sudan had displaced over 10.5 million people. Over 2 million, both Sudanese and others, sought refuge in neighboring countries. The spread of the fighting in central and eastern states placed hundreds of thousands of refugees at risk. Ethiopian refugees were detained during mass arrests by SAF-aligned authorities in Gedaref state. Eritreans fleeing repression and indefinite forced conscription at home continued to arrive at the camps in Kassala state. The RSF also raped refugee women and girls in Khartoum.

Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers experienced threats, abuses, forced returns, and unsustainable living conditions in multiple receiving countries. Egypt unlawfully expelled an estimated 800 Sudanese without access to asylum between January and March 2024, according to Amnesty International. In Ethiopia's conflict-affected Amhara region, Sudanese refugees hosted in camps there faced violent attacks by government forces and non-state armed actors and insufficient protection from Ethiopian authorities.

In Chad, hosting over 600,000 Sudanese refugees arriving as the conflict unfolded, MSF repeatedly raised concerns around limited funding and said uncertainties about future funding was leading to food cuts for refugees.

Countries outside Africa offered scant avenues to protection, resettling only around 2,200 Sudanese refugees between January and August 2024. .

## Accountability

Despite ongoing international investigations, impunity remained the norm as warring parties failed to credibly investigate or prosecute their forces.

The UN FFM identified this impunity as among the key root causes of decades of rights abuses and violations, and made recommendations to advance accountability, including through the expansion of ICC's jurisdiction to cover all of Sudan and urgent consideration of the establishment of a separate international judicial mechanism. The UN FFM's own mandate to support and make recommendations for advancing accountability for grave abuses was extended.

# Syria

The government of Bashar al-Assad was overthrown on December 8, 2024, by a coalition of armed opposition groups, marking an end to over 50 years of Baath Party rule in Syria. As the opposition groups seized cities, they freed prisoners across Syrian prisons and detention centers, and local and international journalists visited former detentions sites and locations of mass graves and other atrocities, providing a new opportunity for accountability.

Non-state armed groups in Syria, including Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA), who initiated the offensive on November 27 that overthrew the Syrian government after a 12-day offensive, were also responsible for human rights abuses and war crimes.

Throughout 2024, Syrians endured abuses and hardship due to the ongoing conflict, worsened economic conditions, and general insecurity. Russia and Iran continued to provide military and financial support to the Syrian government until its collapse, while the United States back the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeast Syria and Türkiye support the Syrian National Army (SNA). Israel conducted airstrikes on Syria throughout 2024, and after December 8, launched strikes that decimated Syrian military infrastructure across the country and extended its military occupation of Syrian territory along the southern slope of Mount Hermon.

Although conditions inside Syria remain unfit for safe and dignified returns of Syrian refugees living abroad, refugee hosting countries Türkiye and Lebanon summarily deported thousands of Syrians back to Syria, and the narrative of Syrian refugee returns intensified across European countries, many of whom paused processing Syrian asylum claims after December 8.

Prior to its collapse, the former Syrian government did not halt abuses or ensure accountability despite an order by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to prevent state-sponsored torture. Some accountability efforts continued outside Syria with war crimes and crimes against humanity convictions in European courts.

## Government-Held Areas (Central, West, and Southern Syria) Prior to December 8

Before the Assad government was overthrown on December 8, Syrian security forces and government-affiliated armed groups continued to arbitrarily detain, disappear, and mistreat civilians. Abuses often targeted those perceived to oppose the government or linked to former opposition-held areas, with little regard for legal process. The former authorities also continued to unlawfully confiscate property and restrict access to areas of origin for returning Syrians. Since early 2024, the former Ministry of Finance imposed unlawful asset freezes on hundreds of people and their families from a previously opposition-held town south of Damascus, a measure that constituted collective punishment.

The September 2024 UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Syria report documented ongoing violations, with little accountability for perpetrators. Arbitrary arrests, particularly under the expanded cybercrime law of 2022, also remained a tool of repression, with at least two individuals arrested for social media posts and charged with "undermining the prestige of the State," according to the COI.

Meanwhile, the 2023 abolition of military field courts, long demanded by human rights advocates, did little to provide justice or transparency for the thousands sentenced without due process. Despite the dissolution of these courts, there was no concerted effort by the government to clarify the fate of the thousands of missing and disappeared.

In September, Bashar al-Assad issued a general amnesty for military deserters and those convicted of minor offenses, but the amnesty excluded detainees held for alleged political opposition. Previous amnesties similarly failed to address the ongoing detainee crisis, with tens of thousands still languishing in detention or missing.

In January 2024, Jordanian airstrikes on Sweida in southern Syria killed 10 people, including two young girls, prompting calls for accountability and compensation for those harmed during these cross-border counter-smuggling operations.

Amid heightened regional tensions from hostilities in Gaza, Israel escalated airstrikes in Syria, including on fighters and military facilities of Iran and Hezbollah. Israeli strikes in

Damascus, Homs, and Deir al-Zor hit densely populated residential areas, resulting in civilian casualties.

## Northwest Syria

On November 27, the Islamist armed group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), alongside factions of the Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), launched a new offensive in Syria from its base in Idlib province, overthrowing the Syrian government on December 8 after a 12-day military campaign.

In recent years northwest Syria has been home to more than 4.1 million people, at least half of whom were displaced at least once since the start of the conflict. Prior to the fall of the Assad government in December, people in these areas were effectively trapped, lacking resources to relocate, unable to seek asylum in Türkiye, and fearing government retaliation or persecution if they attempt to relocate to government-held areas.

In Idlib and western Aleppo, unlawful attacks by Syrian and Russian military forces persisted in 2024 and until the fall of the Assad government, killing civilians and damage critical civilian infrastructure.

In February, triggered by reports of torture by HTS, large protests erupted in Idlib demanding the release of detainees, governance and socioeconomic reforms, and the removal of HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Joulani (also known as Ahmed al-Sharaa). The COI's September report documented the unlawful deprivation of liberty, torture and ill-treatment, executions, and death in detention by HTS.

## Turkish-Occupied Northern Syria

In Turkish-occupied territories of northern Syria, factions of the SNA and the Military Police, a force established by the Türkiye-based Syrian Interim Government (SIG) to curb faction abuses, subjected scores of people to arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture and ill-treatment, sexual violence, and unfair military trials, all with impunity.

SNA factions continued to violate civilians' housing, land and property rights, including by forcefully seizing homes, lands, and businesses. And hundreds of thousands of Syrians

who fled their homes during and after Türkiye's successive military operations into the region remained displaced and dispossessed.

In 2024, the SNA signed an action plan with the UN to prevent child recruitment.

Following the fall of the Assad government in December, the SNA with support from Türkiye launched a military campaign against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northern Syria, expelling the SDF from areas of Aleppo governorate including Manbij, and at the time of writing, were threatening to seize additional territory. The fighting caused over 100,000 people, mostly Kurds, to flee to the northeast, where they faced dire humanitarian conditions.

## Northeast Syria

In 2024, according to the COI's September report, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued to detain political activists.

The SDF and affiliated groups continued recruiting children for military purposes, despite commitments to end the practice.

Unrest in eastern Deir al-Zor governorate intensified, with the SDF conducting security raids that led to civilian casualties. Turkish air strikes targeted civilian facilities across the northwest, putting livelihoods at risk and severing communities from electricity, medical care, and other essential services.

The SDF and Asayish regional security forces continued to arbitrarily detain approximately 44,000 ISIS (Islamic State) suspects and their family members from Syria and nearly 60 other countries in degrading conditions in al-Hol and Roj camps. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), the civil wing of the SDF, passed a law in July allowing for retrial of prisoners previously convicted under overly broad counterterrorism laws in flawed trials.

## Israeli-Occupied Golan Heights

In 2024, Israel continued to violate the law of occupation in the Syrian Golan Heights, which it has occupied since 1967, blocking return of tens of thousands of Syrians who fled their homes to other parts of Syria at the time. A 2021 Israeli plan to double the settler population in the Syrian Golan Heights by 2027 is ongoing. According to the UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights in March, this expansion, coupled with approved commercial activities to exploit natural resources, threatens to further restrict the Syrian population's access to land and water.

On July 27, amid regional tensions borne out of Israel's war on Gaza, a rocket attack on a football field in the village of Majdal Shams, the largest of four remaining Syrian Druze communities in the Golan Heights, killed 12 people, mostly children. Israel claimed that Hezbollah was responsible, but Hezbollah has denied that it conducted the attack.

In December 2024, Israeli forces seized additional territory along the southern slope of Mount Hermon with the stated goal of creating a "buffer zone." Israeli forces conducted numerous strikes targeting Syrian military equipment and infrastructure.

## Economic Crisis and Obstacles to Humanitarian Aid

In 2024, over 90 percent of Syrians lived under the poverty line. Approximately 12.9 million people—more than half of the population—struggled to access sufficient quality food, and at least 16.7 million Syrians required humanitarian aid, marking a nine percent increase from the previous year. Yet, humanitarian funding for Syria plunged to its lowest levels in recent years.

More than 12 years of war have decimated Syria's civilian infrastructure and services, severely affecting access to shelter, health care, electricity, education, public transportation, water, and sanitation. People across the country faced hardship due to severe fuel shortages and rising food prices. The situation has been exacerbated in government-controlled areas by government cuts to social security, often undertaken in an arbitrary manner.

Prior to its collapse in December, the Syrian government continued to impose severe restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian aid in government-held areas of Syria and

elsewhere in the country and to divert aid to punish former opposition areas. A lack of sufficient safeguards in procurement practices by UN agencies providing aid in Syria has resulted in a serious risk of financing abusive entities.

Complex and wide-ranging sanctions imposed by the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and others on the Syrian government, officials, and related entities have hampered the principled and impartial delivery of humanitarian aid to communities in need and the rehabilitation of critical infrastructure, such as healthcare and sanitation facilities.

## Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons

Displacement remains one of the most dire and protracted consequences of the war. Since the start of the armed conflict in 2011, 12.3 million have been forced to flee the country, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), with 6.7 million currently internally displaced across the country.

After the fall of the Assad government in December 2024, many European countries announced that they were halting processing of Syrian asylum claims.

Against a backdrop of anti-refugee sentiment, Türkiye, which hosts nearly 3.3 million Syrian refugees, deported or otherwise pressured thousands to leave the country to northern Syria in 2024, including to Tel Abyad, a remote Turkish-occupied district where lawlessness prevails and humanitarian conditions are dire.

Syrian refugees trying to reach Europe from Lebanon have been intercepted and expelled back by the Lebanese and Cypriot authorities, with many forcibly returned to Syria by the Lebanese Army. Lebanon hosts over 1.5 million Syrian refugees.

Iraqi authorities in Baghdad and Erbil have also arbitrarily detained and deported Syrians to Damascus and to parts of northeast Syria under the control of Kurdish-led forces.

## Women's and Girl's Rights

The conflict in Syria has exacerbated gender inequalities, exposing women and girls to increased violence, displacement, and discriminatory laws limiting their rights. Many women heads of households struggle to register their children's births, heightening the risk of statelessness and restricting access to education and health care.

## International Accountability Efforts

Despite a 2023 ICJ order to stop state-sponsored torture, the Assad government showed no signs of halting its abusive practices or holding anyone accountable in 2024. The former government failed to notify families of detainee deaths, provide crucial information on the circumstances and causes of death, disclose burial sites, or return remains, with some families finding out years after the fact.

In May, French judges convicted three Syrian senior officials in absentia for crimes against humanity and war crimes of imprisonment, enforced disappearance, and torture of two dual Syrian-French citizens.

Universal jurisdiction efforts continued in 2024 with the indictment of Rifaat al-Assad in Switzerland for war crimes and crimes against humanity during the 1982 Hama massacre. In June, a French court upheld arrest warrants against Bashar al-Assad for his alleged complicity in war crimes and crimes against humanity in the 2013 Ghouta chemical weapons attack. The French Cassation Court has yet to rule on their final validity, following a prosecutor's appeal relating to the application of the head of state immunity principle.

A new United Nations body tasked with investigating the fate of over one hundred thousand missing persons in Syria commenced its work in 2024.

# Tajikistan

In 2024 the Tajik government reinforced its crackdown on dissent, jailing public figures, journalists, and bloggers. It also sought the deportation or extradition from other countries of people linked to a banned opposition party.

There has not been any independent investigation or accountability for the deadly government crackdown on peaceful protesters in the Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) in 2021 and 2022. Members of the Pamiri ethnic group, people resident in the GBAO, continue reporting high levels of harassment and pressure from the authorities.

Women's bodily autonomy came under attack in 2024 with authorities targeting both secular style of clothing and religious, while domestic violence remained decriminalized.

## Transnational Repression

In 2024, Tajik authorities sought the detention, deportation, or extradition of several members of Group 24, a banned Tajik opposition movement, living in Lithuania, Poland, and Türkiye. In April 2024, Sulaimon Davlatov, a Group 24 member, was detained in Lithuania, but later released and not deported. In February and March, two senior figures of Group 24, Nasimjon Sharifov and Sukhrob Zafar, disappeared in Türkiye. They later resurfaced in Tajikistan in detention, with signs of torture and ill-treatment, and were sentenced to 20 and 30 years in prison, respectively, after a closed trial on unpublished charges. Group 24's leadership stated they may have been charged with public calls for violent political change. Komron Khudoydodov, brother of former Group 24 activist Shabnam Khudoydodova, left Poland, where he was living, for a third country amid fears of being deported to Tajikistan.

Several EU countries have previously returned, or threatened to return, Tajik asylum seekers despite the risk of imprisonment and torture upon their return. In November, Germany deported Dilmurod Ergashev, a Tajik opposition activist, after refusing his asylum claim. He was detained immediately upon his arrival and provisionally detained for two months by a city court in Tajikistan.

## Repression of Civil Society

Over the summer Tajik authorities conducted a series of arrests of a handful of prominent figures, including Shokirjon Hakimov, a human rights lawyer, publicist, and deputy chairman of the opposition Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan. The detainees, former and current politicians, are charged with high treason for allegedly plotting to seize power. Their access to legal representation has been severely limited, with their lawyers unable, at time of writing, to meet their clients. Hakimov's arrest is especially troubling, as he is one of few remaining expert voices speaking about human rights violations in the country.

Although the government's en-masse closures of many nongovernmental organizations was completed in 2023, the remaining organizations have reported continued pressure to drop work on sensitive human rights issues. Several human rights defenders told Human Rights Watch that they had left the country, as they were unable to continue their work inside Tajikistan.

Following the violent dispersal of peaceful demonstrations in the GBAO region in 2021 and 2022, in August, the Tajik authorities arrested 27 residents of the Yazgulom community in the region. They are suspected of being members of the Ansarullah Islamic group banned in Tajikistan.

## Political Prisoners

Leaders and members of the banned Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan party previously imprisoned on long or life prison sentences remain behind bars, despite continued international calls for their release, including the release of older prisoners on humanitarian grounds. In September, an 80-year-old former member of IRPT, Zubaidullo Roziq, was returned to prison having been hospitalized for a heart condition in August.

## Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression continues to be severely limited in Tajikistan, both for journalists and ordinary citizens. At time of writing, seven journalists were in prison for their critical reporting, including Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva, who, in 2022, was sentenced to 21 years on trumped-up charges of organizing the protests in the GBAO region.

At time of writing, another journalist from the GBAO, Anora Sarkorova, who has reported on the crackdown in the region, was under criminal investigation on charges of public calls to extremist activities.

In February, the Supreme Court sentenced three writers to prison terms of between one and six-and-a-half years for writing, editing, and publishing a book highlighting societal challenges, including corruption and migration. The book was ordered to be removed from bookstores.

In August, journalist Ahmad Ibrohim, chief editor of independent weekly newspaper "Payk," reportedly was arrested on bribery charges related to his newspaper's re-registration. In the past, such arrests have been shown to be politically motivated.

## Freedom of Belief

In June, Tajik president Emomali Rahmon brought into force amendments to the "traditions" law, which bans clothing "foreign to the national culture" in public spaces, effectively prohibiting hijabs and other religious attire. This follows months of campaigns by officials urging women and girls to wear headscarves in the "Tajik" way and forcing men to shave their beards. Media have reported incidents of women and girls being denied hospital entry for not wearing the approved style of head covering, forcibly taking individuals to police stations for fingerprinting and photographing, and detaining men to shave their beards at their own expense. Tajikistan has previously enacted restrictions on circumcisions, baby naming rituals, weddings, religious pilgrimage ceremonies, and funerals.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

Despite widespread awareness of domestic violence in Tajikistan, with studies suggesting that at least 50 percent of women experience abuse in their lifetime, domestic violence is still not criminalized. In July 2024, a senior government official reported that a draft law criminalizing domestic violence was in development, although it was unclear when the bill would be submitted to parliament.

In July, Tajik law enforcement detained two young women for Instagram posts in which they pose wearing shorter dresses, claiming it was "offensive to the honor" of Tajik women and

mothers. The police released them after a “preventive” conversation but posted photographs from the young women’s accounts on the police social media platform without anonymizing their faces or account details. Later, the Tajik Ministry of Culture published examples of traditional national clothing “recommended” for women and girls.

In a positive step, Tajik authorities in January reduced the number of professions prohibited to women and girls from 334 to 194 across 22 economic sectors, citing improved working conditions and increased access to professions for women. However, restrictions remain in transport, underground work, and high-altitude jobs—all highly paid sectors.

## Labor Migrants

Tajik migrants working in Russia have faced increased harassment since the March attack on Crocus City Hall in Moscow, in which Tajik nationals were implicated as organizers. In the first six months of the year Russia deported 17,000 Tajik migrants, 6,000 more than in all of 2023. In February, some Tajik migrants reported being forced to join the Russian military or risk being deported with their families and banned from returning to Russia.

## Conflict at the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border

By September, 94 percent of the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had been delineated, although the remaining 6 percent was reported to include the most difficult sections, located around the Vorukh enclave and villages of Ak-Sai and Kok-Tash. The armed conflict of September 2022 that left 37 people dead, including 5 children, was concentrated in these locations. Both countries committed apparent war crimes in the conflict, leading to the deaths of civilians and the destruction of civilian property, including schools, according to a report by Human Rights Watch in 2023.

# Tanzania

Tanzanian authorities intensified clampdowns on the political opposition in 2024. Police arbitrarily arrested, detained, and carried out extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances of party leaders and supporters during rallies and other people near the North Mara gold mine. The government continued the forced eviction of Indigenous communities in Ngorongoro.

Restrictions on free expression, including social media censorship and arrests under cybercrime laws, persist. Tanzania lacks robust data protection legislation, while lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights are suppressed online and through violence. Although child protection laws have been reformed, they still fail to adequately address corporal punishment and child marriage.

## Arrests and Harassment of Opposition

Over a week in August, police arbitrarily arrested hundreds of opposition party Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (Chadema) supporters ahead of an international youth day celebration in Mbeya. Those arrested included Chadema party chairman Freeman Mbowe, former presidential candidate Tundu Lissu, and several journalists.

On September 23, police rearrested and later released on bail Mbowe, Lissu, and other party members ahead of a rally in Dar es Salaam to protest the government's alleged inaction regarding the abduction of at least five Chadema party affiliates. The police had prohibited the protests, threatening to "deal with" people who did not comply.

## Extrajudicial Killings and Enforced Disappearances

On June 23, Edgar Edson Mwakabela was abducted by plainclothes men. Mkwabela told the media that he was detained overnight at a police station in Dar es Salaam, before being taken to Arusha, where he was beaten and interrogated about his role in mobilizing a boycott by traders. His abductors abandoned him in Katavi National Park, about 1,200 kilometers from Dar es Salaam, four days later.

On July 15, police in Tanga confirmed that they had detained Kombo Twaha Mbwana, a Chadema official, for a month before producing him in court, beyond the legally permitted 24 hours. The authorities accused him of using an unregistered SIM card and on September 5, a court denied him bail. The whereabouts of officials Dioniz Kipanya, missing since July 26, and Deusdedith Soka, who was abducted by unidentified men alongside Jacob Godwin Mlay and Frank Mbise on August 18, remain unknown.

On September 7, the body of Ali Mohamed Kibao, a Chadema party official who was abducted by suspected security agents the previous day, was found beaten and doused with acid.

## Indigenous Peoples' Rights

The Tanzanian government continued to implement a resettlement plan that forcibly displaces Indigenous Maasai herder communities from the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (NCA). The communities were forcibly relocated to Handeni district, Tanga region, about 600 kilometers away, with little or no consultation. Since 2021, authorities substantially reduced the availability and accessibility of public services, including schools and health centers, in the NCA.

A Human Rights Watch report in July found that the restrictions, including access to cultural sites and grazing areas, and a ban on growing crops, have severely impacted residents' lives and livelihoods, forcing many to accept relocation. In August, President Samia Suluhu Hassan ordered the lifting of restrictions on some of those services following peaceful protests by tens of thousands of Maasai.

## Technology and Rights

Tanzania continued to impose restrictions on free expression online and maintain a raft of laws and regulations that facilitate surveillance, including the Cybercrimes Act, the Criminal Procedure Act, and the Electronic and Postal Communication Act, which can compel third parties to disclose personal data. The Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Communications) regulations require online content providers to create systems to "identify source of information or content."

On July 4, Shadrack Chaula was convicted of cybercrimes and sentenced to two years in prison or a fine of five million Tanzania shillings (about US$1,800) for posting a TikTok video in which he allegedly burned a photo of President Hassan and "insulted" her. Chaula was released on July 8 after paying the fine, but has reportedly been missing since August 2.

On August 30, Netblocks, an organization that monitors cybersecurity and the governance of the internet, confirmed that Tanzania had restricted access to social media platform X, limiting access for users.

Tanzania does not have a dedicated regulatory authority for data protection or privacy, resulting in fragmented oversight across different institutions, including the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority.

## Police Misconduct

Since February 2024, police have been credibly implicated in the killing of at least six people, with several others injured, during clashes near the North Mara Gold Mine in Tarime district. Police accused the victims of "invading the mine" and engaging in illegal small-scale mining. Police have made no arrests related to these abuses.

The government provides about 152 police officers to ensure security based on a 2022 agreement with the North Mara Gold Mine Limited. Rights groups and community members have alleged that the police commit arbitrary detentions, beatings, shootings, and torture of residents of communities around the mines. Police accuse the residents of theft from the mine and its surrounding waste rock dumping sites.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

On June 1, Mauzinde, a transgender woman and activist in Zanzibar, was found beaten with both of her ears cut. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that Mauzinde had been "tortured and sexually assaulted by 12 men."

The internet censorship monitoring nongovernmental organization OONI reported that Tanzania has ramped up its digital censorship of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

(LGBT) websites, media, and dating apps, including by blocking the websites of LGBT rights organizations.

The Sexual Offenses Special Provisions Act of 1998 punishes consensual adult same-sex conduct with up to life imprisonment.

## Children's Rights

In June, Tanzania amended its Child Protection Laws to include protection against online sexual abuse and criminalize publication of child sexual abuse material. Legislators failed to prohibit corporal punishment in schools, and did not include provisions to prohibit child marriage, despite a 2019 Court of Appeal decision upholding an earlier ruling that declared the practice unconstitutional.

Thousands of pregnant or parenting girls continue to experience stigma and exclusion in schools. The government has not taken sufficient steps to implement and operationalize the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child's 2022 Communication, which found that Tanzania violated pregnant or parenting girls' rights to education, non-discrimination and freedom from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Tanzania has not effectively implemented its 2021 circular on re-entry of parenting girls to school.

# Thailand

In 2024, rulings by the Constitutional Court that dissolved the reformist Move Forward Party and impeached Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin undermined Thailand's teetering efforts to restore democracy after many years of military rule. The new government of Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra has done little to improve respect for fundamental freedoms and resolve outstanding human rights problems. In one positive step in September, the government finalized the marriage equality bill making Thailand the first country in Southeast Asia to recognize same-sex relationships.

## Dissolution of the Move Forward Party and Sacking of Prime Minister Srettha

On August 7, the Constitutional Court dissolved the opposition Move Forward Party for advocating reform of the Penal Code's article 112 on *lese majesté* (insulting the monarchy) and imposed 10-year political bans on its executive members. This decision was based on the previous ruling on January 31 that the party's campaign to amend the royal insult law and its support for monarchy reform movements amounted to an attempt to abolish Thailand's constitutional democracy with the king as head of state. The remaining 143 Move Forward Party members of parliament later regrouped to form the People's Party.

The Constitutional Court sacked Srettha on August 14 for lacking integrity and seriously violating ethical standards because he appointed a cabinet member who was convicted of bribing court officials in 2008.

## New Government

The new government took office in September—led by Paetongtarn, who promised during her 2023 election campaign to discuss in parliament preventing royal insult charges from being used as a political tool and to release on bail detained democracy activists and dissidents. After becoming prime minister, she vowed to "make every inch of Thailand to become an area of opportunity for Thai people to dream, to be creative, and to define their own future."

Despite such pledges and Thailand's election to the United Nations Human Rights Council for the 2025-2027 term, the new government has not taken concrete steps to address

outstanding issues from the UN Universal Periodic Review. The parliament approved the Comprehensive Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union in August. This has not resulted in any significant cooperation to improve respect for human rights. Paetongtarn has yet to follow up on the previous government's assurance it would stop the Myanmar military from purchasing weapons via Thailand's banking system.

## Restrictions on Freedoms of Expression and Peaceful Assembly

Expression of critical and dissenting opinions remains restricted in Thailand. As of August, at least 1,959 people have been prosecuted for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful public assembly—including at least 274 people facing *lese majesté* charges. Thai authorities have often held critics of the monarchy for months without access to bail, awaiting trial. On May 14, anti-monarchy activist Netiporn Sanesangkhom died during pretrial detention.

Making critical or offensive comments about the monarchy is also a serious criminal offense under the Computer-Related Crime Act. Thai authorities have also used sedition charges to prosecute over 150 democracy activists and dissidents.

At least 1,469 people believed to be involved in 2020 protests are still being prosecuted ostensibly for violating Covid-19 containment measures adopted by the Emergency Decree, even though that decree was lifted in October 2022.

On September 5, Thai authorities pressured the Alliance Française Bangkok to cancel a book launch about Wanchalearm Satsaksit, who was forcibly disappeared in Cambodia in 2020.

## Enforced Disappearance and Torture

Thailand is a state party to international conventions against torture and enforced disappearance. However, its Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance Act—which became effective in February 2022—is weakly enforced.

None of the outstanding cases of enforced disappearance—including of nine exiled Thai dissidents who were abducted in neighboring countries in recent years—have been

resolved. The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances raised concerns about enforced disappearances in the context of transnational transfers of dissidents between Thailand and neighboring countries.

Numerous allegations that police and military personnel tortured ethnic Malay Muslims in custody during the government's counterinsurgency operations in the southern border provinces remain unresolved. There are also credible reports of torture being used as a form of punishment of military conscripts.

## Human Rights Defenders

The government has failed to fulfill its obligation to ensure human rights defenders can carry out their work in a safe and enabling environment.

On June 25, unidentified gunmen shot dead Roning Dolah, a prominent human rights defender who assisted ethnic Malay Muslim victims of arbitrary arrest and torture by Thai security forces, in Pattani province. The killing and enforced disappearance of human rights defenders and other civil society activists is a serious blot on Thailand's human rights record. Coverups have effectively blocked efforts to pursue justice, even in high-profile cases such as those of ethnic Lahu activist Chaiyaphum Pasae, ethnic Karen activist Porlajee Rakchongchareon, and Muslim lawyer Somchai Neelapaijit.

Despite the adoption of Thailand's National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights in 2019, Thai authorities have failed to protect activists and whistleblowers from retaliatory lawsuits by state agencies and private companies.

## Lack of Accountability for State-Sponsored Abuses

Thai authorities failed to bring to trial 14 former military personnel and government officials indicted in the criminal charges—including murder, attempted murder, and unlawful detention—related to the violent dispersal of ethnic Malay Muslim protesters in Tak Bai district of Narathiwat province in October 2004 that left 85 dead and several hundred injured. The 20-year statute of limitations ended in October 2024, preventing further legal action.

There has been little progress in criminal and civil cases related to abuses and excessive use of force by riot police to disperse democracy rallies from 2020-2023.

Soldiers were responsible for most casualties during the 2010 political confrontations with the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, known as the "Red Shirts," that left at least 99 dead and more than 2,000 injured. No military personnel or government officials from the administration of then-Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva have been prosecuted.

The government also has failed to pursue criminal investigations of the more than 2,800 killings that accompanied then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's "war on drugs" in 2003.

## Violence and Abuses in the Southern Border Provinces

The armed conflict in Thailand's Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Songkhla provinces has resulted in more than 7,000 deaths since January 2004. In 2024, insurgent attacks on military targets and civilians continued despite dialogues between representatives of the government and the separatist Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN). Meanwhile, Thai security forces committed torture, unlawful killings, and other abuses of ethnic Malay Muslims with impunity. In many cases, Thai authorities provided payments to the victims or their families to avoid prosecutions.

Thailand has not endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration, while BRN continued to recruit children for insurgent activities.

## Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrant Workers

Thailand is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol, but its Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance Act prohibits refoulement—the forcible return of anyone to a place where they would face a genuine risk of persecution, torture, or other ill-treatment, or a threat to their life. However, Thai officials continued to treat refugees and asylum seekers as irregular migrants subject to arrest and deportation. Thai authorities violated the international prohibition against refoulement by returning refugees and asylum seekers to countries where they are likely to face persecution.

On June 12, the UN special rapporteur on human rights defenders expressed concerns about the arrest of Montagnard refugee Y Quynh Bdap and urged Thai authorities not to extradite him to Vietnam.

Escalating fighting in Myanmar and the junta's enforcement of the conscription law has raised concerns about more people fleeing Myanmar and their ability to access to protection in Thailand. In April, the Foreign Ministry stated that Thailand had prepared to temporarily receive up to 100,000 Myanmar refugees—in addition to approximately 90,000 people living in nine refugee camps along the Myanmar border for the past three decades.

Thai authorities have refused to consider Lao, Hmong, Uyghurs, Rohingya, and North Koreans for refugee status under the National Screening Mechanism.

Approximately 50 Uyghurs and several hundred Rohingya are being held in indefinite detention in squalid conditions in immigration detention centers across Thailand, where the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is not allowed access.

In August, Thailand withdrew its reservation to article 22 of the Convention on Rights of the Child regarding protection of children seeking refugee status or who are considered a refugee. But the Education Ministry shut down six schools for children from Myanmar across the country in September 2024 for illegally teaching in Burmese language.

Migrant workers of all nationalities are barred by Thailand's Labor Relations Act from organizing and establishing labor unions or serving as a government-recognized labor union leader.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In September, the government promulgated the marriage equality bill adopted by the parliament earlier in 2024, making Thailand the first country in Southeast Asia to recognize same-sex relationships. However, Thailand still has no procedure for transgender people to be legally recognized according to their gender identity.

# Tunisia

Tunisian authorities intensified repression of political opposition and other critical voices by carrying out mass arrests, imprisoning journalists, and targeting civil society groups.

As of November, over 80 people were detained on political grounds or for exercising their fundamental rights, including political opponents, activists, lawyers, journalists, human rights defenders, and social media users.

Authorities undermined the integrity of the October 6 presidential election to ensure President Kais Saied's re-election, including by excluding or imprisoning prospective challengers and amending the electoral law just days before the election.

Tunisian security forces continued abuses against migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees with impunity. The European Union continued efforts to enhance migration cooperation with Tunisia despite ongoing violations.

## Presidential Election

In October, President Kais Saied was re-elected for a second term with 90.69 percent of the vote on 28.8 percent voter turnout.

Tunisian authorities intensified repression in the run-up to the election and targeted several potential presidential challengers to Saied. They convicted or detained at least 10 prospective candidates, as well as several members of their campaign teams, while harassing and intimidating others.

On August 10, the electoral commission approved only three candidates for the presidential election and rejected 14 others. Several candidates filed

appeals before the administrative court, and three of them won, but the electoral commission disregarded the rulings.

On September 2, authorities arrested Ayachi Zammel, one of just three approved presidential candidates. On September 18, a Jendouba court sentenced him to 20 months in prison, and on September 25, it sentenced him to an additional six months. On September 30, a Tunis court sentenced Zammel to 12 years' imprisonment and a ban on voting, on charges of falsifying endorsements' signatures. A member of his campaign team arrested on September 27 was sentenced to 12 years in prison.

Tunisia's electoral commission, which Saied restructured in 2022 to place under his control, arbitrarily denied accreditation to two leading election observation groups, I Watch and Mourakiboun, under the pretext of "suspicious foreign financing." Both groups are now facing investigation.

## Political Crackdown

Authorities carried out a wholesale political crackdown leading up to the October elections. In September, security officers arrested over a hundred members or supporters of the Ennahda opposition party under Tunisia's counterterrorism law. They were released after several days in custody, except for four who were placed in pre-trial detention.

On July 18, a Tunis court sentenced Lotfi Mraihi, leader of the Republican People's Union and prospective presidential candidate, to eight months in prison and imposed a lifetime ban on running for office for allegedly "making donations in cash or in kind in order to influence voters." His party's executive director and three other members were also convicted and sentenced.

On August 5, a Tunis court sentenced five other prospective presidential candidates, Abdellatif Mekki, Nizar Chaari, Mourad Messaoudi, Mohamed Adel

Dou, and Leila Hammami to eight months in prison and a lifetime ban on running for office, on the same charges.

That same day, a Tunis court also sentenced Abir Moussi, president of the Free Destourian Party, to two years in prison under Decree-Law 54 on Cybercrime for "spreading fake news" about the electoral commission.

On August 14, a Jendouba court sentenced a rapper and prospective candidate, Karim Gharbi, to four years in prison and a lifetime ban on running for office, on charges of buying endorsement signatures. Four people volunteering for Gharbi's campaign were also sentenced to prison terms.

## Judicial Independence

Saied's government continued to systematically undermine judicial independence, targeting judges and using the judiciary to serve his political ends. On October 3, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights ordered the suspension of the presidential decree giving the president authority to dismiss magistrates and the decree by which Saied dismissed 57 judges and prosecutors in 2022.
On September 27, Tunisia's Assembly of the Representatives of the People passed a new law stripping the Administrative Court of jurisdiction in electoral matters, preventing it from acting as a check on abuses.

## Freedom of Expression

Authorities continued to use repressive laws to muzzle freedom of expression, including Decree-Law 54 on Cybercrime, which violates the right to privacy and provides harsh sentences for vaguely defined speech offenses.

On January 31, the Monastir Appeals Court sentenced Rached Tamboura to two years in prison under Decree 54, in connection with graffiti showing a portrait of Saied flanked by the words "racist vassal greed fascist."

On March 7, the Kef Military Court sentenced Nasreddine Halimi to seven years in prison under the Cybercrime Law and Tunisia's military justice code for Facebook posts criticizing the president and the military. The sentence was later reduced to two years and Halimi was released in June.

Between October and November, several social media influencers were sentenced to prison terms in connection with content deemed "offensive to public morals and decency."

## Media Freedom

Authorities ramped up their crackdown on media freedom, gradually wiping out criticism and diversity from the media landscape. At least five media professionals were behind bars for their work or opinions as of November.

According to the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists, at least 39 cases were brought against journalists for their work since May 2023, including under the Cybercrime law and the counterterrorism law.

On January 10, a Tunis court sentenced journalist Zied El-Heni to a six-month suspended prison sentence for "insulting" the trade minister at the time, Kalthoum Ben Rejeb, after he criticized her on a radio show.

On July 6, a Tunis court sentenced Sonia Dahmani, a lawyer and media commentator arrested on May 11, to a year in prison for critical remarks on a TV show, under Decree-Law 54. Her sentence was later reduced to eight months. On October 24, she was sentenced in another case to two years in prison for her statements.

On May 22, a Tunis court sentenced Borhen Bsaies and Mourad Zeghidi, both prominent journalists, to a year in prison under the same law. Their sentences were later reduced to eight months.

On April 17, journalist Mohamed Boughalleb was sentenced to six months in prison for defaming an official after he criticized the religious affairs minister. He has been detained since March 22.

## Attacks on Civil Society

Authorities have targeted several civil society groups and activists with arrests, interrogation, and by opening investigations into their financing. Authorities clamped down on solidarity with migrants and arrested members of organizations providing aid to asylum seekers and refugees, fueling an even more dire situation.

Between May 3 and 13, security forces arrested at least six members of three legally registered nongovernmental organizations working on migration, asylum, and racial justice: Mnemty, the Tunisian Refugee Council (TRC), and Terre d'Asile Tunisie. Members of other organizations were investigated and summoned during the same period.

TRC's director, Mustafa Djemali, and its project director, Abderrazek Krimi, were arrested on May 2 and placed in pretrial detention on charges of illegally sheltering persons in Tunisia. TRC, which was shut down by authorities at the time, was a key partner of UNHCR in Tunisia, primarily responsible for collection and screening asylum applications, and arranging emergency accommodation and medical assistance for refugees and asylum seekers.

Saadia Mosbah, head of the anti-racism organization Mnemty, was arrested on May 6. Mosbah was later placed in detention pending investigation into alleged financial crimes under Tunisia's 2015 counterterrorism law in connection with Mnemty's funding and activities.

Two current or former members of Terre d'Asile Tunisie were in pretrial detention, pending investigation into the organization's funding.

On August 1, a judge detained former president of the Truth and Dignity Commission, Sihem Bensedrine, on charges of "using her position to gain unfair advantage," "fraud," and "forgery" in connection with the commission's final report. On August 8, three UN experts said Bensedrine's arrest "could amount to judicial harassment…for work she has undertaken" as head of the commission.

## Migrants, Asylum Seekers, and Refugees

As of October, there were over 15,600 refugees and asylum seekers registered with the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) in Tunisia, including over 7,400 Sudanese nationals, many of whom had fled Sudan's conflict since April 2023.

UN experts expressed alarm over "shocking reports" of human rights violations against migrants, refugees and victims of trafficking. During 2024, security forces, notably the National Guard, continued unlawful and abusive collective expulsions of hundreds of migrants and asylum seekers to the borders of Algeria and Libya, leaving people in remote desert areas in life-threatening conditions – an ongoing pattern since 2023. In one instance in early May, shortly after a Rome meeting on migration between the interior ministers of Algeria, Italy, Libya, and Tunisia, security forces raided two makeshift camps and a youth hostel in Tunis, evicting hundreds of Black African migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. At least 80 were arrested and 400 or more were expelled to the country's borders, including Sudanese asylum seekers.

President Saied claimed on May 6 that foreign funding was being funneled through national organizations to settle migrants in Tunisia illegally, referring to their heads as "traitors." This followed his 2023 tirade against migrants from African countries, which set off a wave of violent, xenophobic attacks.

The EU continued its migration management cooperation with Tunisia, building on a 2023 memorandum of understanding that increased EU funding to the Tunisian authorities to stem irregular sea migration to Europe, without adequate human

rights safeguards. The EU failed to speak up against authorities' violations of migrant rights and attacks against civil society groups.

## Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

Tunisia is still facing an economic crisis with high public debt and inflation affecting economic and social rights. Public debt in 2024 reached about 80 percent of GDP, and according to the National Institute of Statistics, inflation stood at 6.7 percent as of September and food prices increased by 9.2 percent compared to 2023.

As of June, at least several hundred people were in prison solely for writing checks they were later unable to pay, amounting to imprisonment for debt and violating international human rights law. Insolvent people were imprisoned or forced to live in hiding or exile, fueling a cycle of indebtedness and reducing entire households to hardship.

On July 30, the Assembly of People's Representatives adopted a new law that reduced prison sentences and financial penalties for unpaid checks. The law mandated that prosecution for bad checks is no longer automatic, required the public prosecutor to explore mediation before prosecution, and allowed for detainees to request release. According to the Justice Ministry, over 500 people have been released since the new law came into effect on August 2.

# Türkiye

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP)-led parliamentary coalition government exert strong control over the media, courts, and most state institutions, regularly sidelining or punishing perceived government critics. Political divisions and power struggles within Türkiye's top courts and increasing reports of corruption within the state and judiciary have further undermined human rights and the rule of law. Authorities including courts continued to ignore or reject binding judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), finding Türkiye in violation, leading to perpetuation of serious violations. A cost-of-living crisis continued in 2024, with the Turkish Statistical Institute reporting an annual inflation rate of 47 percent in November.

Local elections in March saw the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) make the largest gains against Erdoğan's AKP in over two decades, securing 37.8 percent of the vote nationally against the AKP's 35 percent and holding on to the Istanbul and Ankara municipalities.

## Freedom of Expression

Government control of the media extends to the public broadcaster TRT and public news wire service Anadolu Ajansı (Anatolian Agency), and the majority of television news channels and print media are government-aligned. Independent media in Türkiye operate mainly via online platforms.

Authorities regularly order the blocking of websites and platforms or removal of critical online content or negative news coverage relating to public officials, companies, the president and his family, and members of the judiciary. They typically cite as grounds unspecific threats to national security or public order or violations of personal rights. Constitutional Court decisions published in November 2023 and January 2024 found that two articles of internet law no. 5651 permitting blocking or removal of content on these grounds violate the right to freedom of expression; the January decision repealed the article concerning violations of personal rights.

Courts frequently issue blocking orders for multiple accounts in one judgment. The Freedom of Expression Association's EngelliWeb project announced that as of the end of March Türkiye had blocked over one million websites since the 2007 introduction of the internet law.

On August 2, Turkish officials, without issuing specific grounds, blocked the entire Instagram platform for eight days after the presidency's communications director criticized Meta's removal of condolence messages concerning the former head of Hamas' political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, killed on July 31.

Deutsche Welle and Voice of America online news platforms have been indefinitely blocked in Türkiye since June 2022 over their refusal to obtain licenses. They refuse on grounds that licensing would expose them to arbitrary fines and sanctions Türkiye's broadcasting watchdog regularly issues to online broadcasters not aligned with the government.

Journalists regularly face prosecution under Türkiye's Anti-Terror Law, as well as under criminal defamation and other laws. Kurdish journalists are disproportionately targeted. In July, the Ankara trial of 11 Kurdish journalists resulted in the conviction of eight on charges of "membership of a terrorist organization," each sentenced to six years and three months in prison. They have appealed the verdicts. The Diyarbakır trial of 20 Kurdish journalists and media workers on the same charges continued. At time of writing, at least 21 journalists and media workers were in pretrial detention or serving prison sentences for terrorism offenses for journalistic work or association with media.

## Freedoms of Association and Assembly

Thousands of people face detention, investigations, and unfair trials on terrorism charges for alleged links with the movement led by deceased US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen, which the government deems a terrorist organization responsible for the July 15, 2016 attempted military coup. Many have faced prolonged and arbitrary imprisonment with no effective remedy after mass removal from civil service jobs and the judiciary. The justice minister announced in July that 13,251 remanded and convicted persons alleged to be members of the movement remained in prison.

To date the Turkish authorities have failed to implement a key ruling of the ECtHR finding that the conviction on charges of "membership of a terrorist organization" of former teacher Yüksel Yalçınkaya, mainly for having a mobile phone application called ByLock allegedly used by Gülen followers, was an arbitrary application of the law that violated the principle of legality. The judgment also found violations of fair trial and freedom of association rights and ruled that Türkiye needed to implement general measures to address the violations. There were around 8,000 similar cases before the Strasbourg court at time of writing. In Yalçınkaya's September retrial, a local court disregarded the ECtHR and convicted him again on the same charges.

Provincial authorities regularly ban protests and assemblies of constituencies critical of the government, often flouting domestic court rulings that such bans are disproportionate. Police violently detain demonstrators associated with leftist or Kurdish groups.

## Attacks on Human Rights Defenders

Osman Kavala, Çiğdem Mater, Can Atalay, Mine Özerden, and Tayfun Kahraman, known for their civil society engagement, remain in prison after their convictions on baseless charges of organizing the 2013 Gezi Park protests and attempting to overthrow the government. Kavala has been arbitrarily detained since October 2017 and the others since their conviction in April 2022. Türkiye has flagrantly disregarded the ECtHR decision ordering Kavala's release, prompting his lawyers to file a new ECtHR challenge in January 2024 concerning continuing violation of his rights.

In January, human rights lawyer Can Atalay was stripped of the parliamentary seat he won as a member of the Workers' Party of Türkiye in May 2023 parliamentary elections, despite final rulings by the Constitutional Court ordering his release to assume elected office. The case sparked a major crisis in the judiciary, with the Court of Cassation taking the unprecedented step of rejecting two Constitutional Court decisions and even requesting criminal investigation of the court's members.

In November, the government withdrew an espionage bill and pledged to amend it. Human rights groups and journalists had raised concerns that the draft law sought to expand the

definition of espionage in such a vague manner that it could be used to criminalize legitimate work by civil society groups and the media.

## Torture and Ill-Treatment in Custody

In July, the UN Committee against Torture reviewed Türkiye for the first time since the marked rise in torture and ill-treatment that followed the 2016 attempted military coup. The committee's concluding observations raised concerns that allegations of torture and ill-treatment occur "in a generalized manner, notably in detention centres," and that where prosecutions take place acts of torture are "frequently classified as other crimes." Recommendations included ending the practice of reverse handcuffing widely used by the police, and ending "all extrajudicial extraditions and renditions, including of individuals with perceived or real affiliations" to the Gülen movement. The committee further recommended the abolition of the penalty of aggravated life imprisonment, entailing "de facto solitary confinement" and no prospect of release.

## Kurdish Conflict and Crackdown on Opposition

Türkiye concentrates its military campaign against the armed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) with air and drone strikes in northern Iraq where PKK bases are located and in northeast Syria against the Kurdish-led, US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Turkish air strikes targeted civilian facilities, putting livelihoods at risk and depriving communities of electricity and other essential services.

During 2024, and at time of writing, after the collapse of the rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Türkiye continued to occupy territories in northern Syria with the stated objective of protecting itself against the Syrian Kurdish de facto administration and armed groups aligned with the PKK. The Turkish authorities have failed to curb abuses by their Syrian National Army (SNA) and Military Police proxies in the occupied territories. Kurds and Arabs in those areas have been subjected to arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, torture and ill-treatment, sexual violence, and unfair military trials. Thousands have been forcibly displaced, their property, land, and businesses seized.

Hundreds of Kurdish activists and former parliamentarians, mayors, and party officials in Türkiye are in prison or are serving sentences after being convicted of terrorism offenses

for legitimate non-violent political activities, speeches, and social media postings. They include jailed former Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, in prison since November 4, 2016; in May they were convicted to long prison terms despite ECtHR judgments ordering their immediate release.

In October the leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), in coalition with Erdoğan's AKP, advocated review of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's sentence of life imprisonment without parole, of which he has served 25 years, and even his possible release, if Öcalan called on the PKK to disband. The proposal did not address the rights deficit for Kurds, which lies at the heart of the decades-long conflict between the Turkish military and the PKK. The evolving situation in Syria will also be an important factor in any future resolution of the Kurdish conflict.

By November, the government had removed two CHP and five Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) mayors elected in March elections, citing terrorism trials or investigations against them. This was the third time the AKP-MHP coalition had taken over Kurdish municipalities in the southeast, but the first time Kurdish CHP mayors were removed and, in the case of the Istanbul Esenyurt mayor, detained.

## Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants

Türkiye continues to host the world's largest number of refugees. As of December, 2,9 million Syrians had temporary protection status. The Turkish government mostly deems people from Afghanistan, Iraq, and other non-European countries irregular migrants and strictly limits avenues for them to apply for international protection, routinely deporting large groups, publishing statistics that show it, and conducting mass summary pushbacks at the borders. Unlawful deportations of men and some boys to northern Syria, often after being coerced into signing voluntary return forms, continued.

Xenophobic violence against Syrians amidst rising hostility to refugees, stoked by political parties regularly weaponizing the issue in their political discourse, also continued. In July, crowds in the city of Kayseri attacked shops and cars of Syrians and a mob in Antalya killed a 17-year-old Syrian boy.

## Women's Rights

The impact of Türkiye's March 20, 2021 withdrawal by presidential decree from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) was reflected in continuing government failure to take adequate measures to curb Türkiye's high incidence of gender-based violence and femicides. While the interior minister announced in July that 166 women victims of violence had been killed by men in the first six months of 2024, research by independent media organization Bianet put the number at 193.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The Erdoğan government and religious conservative opposition parties regularly use discriminatory political speech amounting to hate speech against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities on the pretext of promoting family values, attempting to appeal to conservative voter bases and fomenting societal polarization. This has put LGBT people at great risk. Istanbul Pride was banned for the tenth consecutive year and many cities across the country impose similar bans.

## Climate Change Policy and Impacts

Despite ratifying the Paris Agreement in 2021 and preparing to update its weak greenhouse gas emission mitigation targets, gaps in climate policy and lack of plans for just transition make it unclear whether Türkiye will be able to meet its own 2053 net zero goal or the European Union's 2026 deadline for enforcement of its carbon border adjustment mechanism.

Türkiye has not yet committed to a coal phase-out and has plans to expand one of the country's oldest and most polluting coal power plants in the southeastern Kahramanmaraş province. Air pollution control regulations do not meet World Health Organization standards and are not fully compliant with European Union standards.

# Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan's government imposes harsh restrictions on free expression and exerts total control over access to information. It allows no space for dissent and prohibits activity by unregistered nongovernmental organizations. Authorities continue to impose arbitrary foreign travel bans and engage in transnational repression including by denying Turkmens the ability to renew their passport abroad.

Many wrongfully imprisoned individuals remain behind bars, and the fate of dozens of victims of enforced disappearances remains unknown.

Shortages of subsidized food continue. Authorities restrict women's and girls' rights. Consensual same-sex conduct between men is a criminal offense under Turkmen law, punishable by a maximum two-year prison sentence.

## Freedom of Movement, Denial of Passports

In 2024 Turkmen authorities continued to groundlessly bar people from boarding international flights or otherwise travel abroad. Obtaining biometric passports inside Turkmenistan has become an ordeal for many Turkmen citizens, with additional requirements imposed and waits as long as two years, unless one is willing to pay a bribe. The government tightly controls internal migration.

In September, authorities orally ordered public sector workers to surrender their passports to prevent them from foreign travel. In August, the administrations of two universities required newly admitted students to surrender their passports to prevent their foreign travel. Students of one university were required to sign a statement confirming they would not leave Turkmenistan until graduation or face expulsion.

In August, authorities arbitrarily, and without explanation, prevented some Turkmen citizens from travelling to Uzbekistan.

On November 20, authorities forcibly hospitalized an independent journalist, Soltan Achilova, to prevent her from traveling to Geneva to attend human rights events, falsely claiming that she had an infectious disease.

Authorities continue to refuse to renew Turkmen passports through consular services, forcing Turkmen citizens living abroad to return to the country. This requirement is arbitrary, violates freedom of movement, and involves the risk of being barred from further travel abroad. For foreign-based activists, it also involves risk of persecution upon return.

## Treatment of Government Critics

Turkmen authorities do not tolerate any dissent or criticism. Civic activists and government critics, including those in exile and their families, face constant threat of government reprisal.

In June, security and law enforcement officers conducted unannounced searches at the homes of migrant workers who had returned from abroad. They confiscated electronic devices, allegedly to identify "unreliable" citizens who might have worked with independent outlets or exiled dissidents. Officials also summoned such individuals, checked their devices, and held them in detention without water and food for several days.

Rovshen Klychev, who had openly criticized the government on social media and was deported from Türkiye to Turkmenistan in July 2023, was reportedly sentenced to 17 years in prison on unknown criminal charges.

In August, a court convicted Merdan Mukhamedov, an activist with an exiled political opposition group, on multiple criminal charges, including conspiracy to overthrow the government, in a closed trial, following his deportation from Türkiye in June. His sentence was not made public.

Turkmen authorities are believed to have requested Turkish authorities to bar at least two exiled Turkmen activists from entering Türkiye in 2024. On July 25, Turkish authorities deported Ruslan Myatiev, the editor of Turkmen.news, on alleged "national security" grounds, and, in November 2023, they deported Tajigul Begmedova, head of the Turkmen Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, on similar grounds.

On June 8, authorities released Nurgeldy Khalykov, a Turkmen.news freelance correspondent, after he served out his four-year prison sentence on fabricated fraud charges. But many others remain imprisoned on bogus, politically motivated charges. They

include Mansur Mengelov, Murad Dushemov, Murat Ovezov, and Myalikberdy Allamuradov.

In October, assailants in Boston beat Daud Kyarizov, media editor with a Turkmen exiled activist group. The attack happened one week after his family publicized the UN Human Rights Committee's finding that Turkmenistan's government had violated the rights of Kyarizov's exiled father, Geldy, when he was imprisoned in the 2000's and that it should compensate him.

## Political Prisoners, Enforced Disappearances

Dozens of people arrested in the late 1990s and early 2000s remain forcibly disappeared in Turkmen prisons. There are an estimated 96 continuing enforced disappearances, including at least 33 individuals whose prison terms expired between 2017 and 2024 but whose fates and whereabouts remain unknown. During its annual human rights dialogue with Turkmenistan in June 2024, the EU raised continued concerns about enforced disappearances and "a number of individual human rights cases," stressing the importance of access by the International Committee of the Red Cross and UN special procedures.

Twenty-six men tried on a variety of charges in closed trials and sentenced to up to 25 years in 2017 for having links to the movement led by US-based Turkish Sunni Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen, whom Türkiye blames for masterminding the 2016 attempted military coup in Türkiye, remained behind bars.

## Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

Turkmenistan's government failed to ensure an adequate standard of living and the right to food for economically marginalized groups. Authorities respond to complaints about food shortages and price increases with fines and interrogations.

Independent reporting in 2024 indicated that the availability of subsidized food staples continued to shrink while prices, including for state subsidized foods, continued to rise significantly.

In February security services reportedly interrogated residents in the Mary region after they tried to meet the mayor to express frustration over price increases for flour and bread in state stores.

Sporadic bread shortages in state stores, at subsidized prices, continued. Authorities tightly control bread sales and queues in state food stores to create an appearance of "cheap, available bread."

## Freedom of Media and Information

There is no media freedom in Turkmenistan. Access to the internet remains severely limited, with more than 122,000 internet domains blocked countrywide.

Turkmen authorities continue to crackdown on users and providers of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). In February 2024, Balkan province authorities turned off internet service in the homes of people who use VPNs often and restored it only after users signed a written undertaking promising not to use VPNs. The authorities restored internet service to hundreds of residents only after the security services searched their phones for suspicious content. In one school, police searched students' phones. They questioned the parents of students who had VPNs seeking evidence of engagement on certain social media on their devices. Authorities designated these families "unreliable."

## Freedom of Religion

The Turkmen authorities tightly monitor registered religious groups and forbid unregistered congregations, and groups. Individuals who allegedly engage in religious activities beyond state-approved religions are severely punished and sentenced to lengthy prison sentences.

In May, police and security services in one region pressured ethnic Turkmens, Tatars, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and their families not to attend orthodox churches and to "return" to Islam.

In July, security services and a religious affairs official visited the family of Rahymjan Borjakov, a pastor, seeking information about his other relatives. Borjakov is a head of an unregistered protestant church.

In April, security services warned state sector employees who had taken part in the annual Hajj Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca not to display their faith at work, grow beards, or wear white headscarves, forcing those who refuse "to sign 'voluntary' resignation letters."

## Women's and Girls' Rights

Abortions after five weeks of pregnancy remain outlawed. In August, authorities visited medical institutions, warning practitioners that performing abortions would result in loss of their license. There are widespread reports of serious restrictions on women's and girls' autonomy. This includes arbitrary requirements, such as a minimum age of 35 to obtain drivers' licenses, and, in Mary and Balkan regions, mandatory gynecological examinations for secondary school girls to verify their "moral purity." So-called "virginity testing" is an abusive practice that is not merely unscientific, but a form of violence that may constitute torture.

In its sixth periodic report on Turkmenistan, in February 2024, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) expressed concern about these restrictions and practices. It also noted reports of pressure on women and girls to uphold societal gender stereotypes, lack of legislation criminalizing domestic violence, women's and girls' lack of access to adequate sexual and reproductive health services, and "forced virginity testing on young girls in cases of rape."

# Uganda

Uganda's human rights environment remains restrictive, with the government clamping down on free expression, peaceful assembly, and dissent. Authorities have arrested and charged individuals for criticizing officials online. Protests against corruption have been met with mass arrests. Environmental activists face ongoing harassment and arbitrary arrests for opposing large-scale oil projects like the East African Crude Oil Pipeline.

There have been some positive, albeit limited, developments, including the Constitutional Court striking down parts of the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act that restricted healthcare access and criminalized lease of properties to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. The court however upheld provisions of the Act that reinforce discrimination and impose legal penalties against LGBT people.

Immediate challenges include addressing lack of accountability for serious crimes. Courts have convicted some former Lord's Resistance Army commanders, but the government has not pursued independent investigations into grave crimes committed by the military during that war or for the 2016 Kasese massacre. The authorities' went ahead with plans to implement real-time vehicle tracking raise concerns about privacy rights.

## Freedoms of Expression and Assembly

The authorities clamped down on free expression online, arresting and charging individuals for criticizing government officials online.

On February 23, prosecutors charged Ibrahim Musana, known on TikTok as Pressure 24/7, with promoting hate speech and spreading malicious information. They claimed Musana used his social media accounts to share content "likely to degrade and to promote hostility" against prominent Ugandan figures, including President Yoweri Museveni, speaker of parliament, Anita Among, the king of Buganda Ronald Mutebi, and State Minister for Information Communication Technology and National Guidance Joyce Ssebugwawo. A court released Musana on bail on April 29 after spending the constitutional 60 days on remand pending trial.

On July 10, a magistrate sentenced 24-year-old Edward Awebwa to six years in prison for insulting the president and his family on TikTok. Authorities charged Awebwa with hate speech and spreading "misleading and malicious" information about President Museveni, his wife, and his son, Muhoozi Kainerugaba who heads the military.

The police in Kampala detained, in July, at least 100 anti-corruption protesters and charged them with the colonial-era "common nuisance" offense.

## Environment and Human Rights

Environmental defenders and anti-fossil fuel activists have routinely faced threats and arbitrary arrests for raising concerns over the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) and other fossil fuel projects.

Since May, authorities arrested at least 81 environmental rights defenders who protested against large-scale oil projects in the country. On June 4, plainclothes Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) officers reportedly detained Steven Kwikiriza, an environmental rights defender, in an unknown location. Five days later, his captors abandoned him by the roadside 250 kilometers from Kampala, having beaten him severely.

## Attacks and Harassment of Opposition Leaders and Supporters

On July 23, Kenyan and Ugandan security officials in Kisumu, Kenya, conducted an extraordinary rendition of 36 members of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), a Ugandan opposition party. The Ugandan police claimed the FDC members had traveled to Kenya for terrorist training. The group was charged on July 29 before a Kampala court on terrorism charges and were remanded to prison pending trial. On October 31, a High Court judge released them on bail.

On September 3, security agents in Kampala shot Robert Kyagulanyi, popularly known as Bobi Wine, of the National Unity Platform opposition party in the leg. Police said officers tried to block Kyagulanyi and his team from marching down a road, leading to an altercation during which he was injured.

## Womens' and Girls' Rights

Uganda's maternal mortality rate improved from 336 to 189 deaths per 100,000 live births since 2016, according to a government report launched in 2024. However, most maternal mortality continues to be preventable. Violence against women and girls in Uganda continues to be prevalent.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

On April 3, Uganda's Constitutional Court upheld key provisions of the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act, further entrenching discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. The court struck down sections that restricted healthcare access for LGBT people, criminalized renting property to them, and mandated reporting of alleged homosexual acts. However, the judges ruled that the law did not violate fundamental rights to equality, privacy, freedom of expression, or the right to work.

In March, the Court of Appeal rejected a petition brought by Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), a leading group advocating for LGBT rights, to compel the government to register the group's name. The court held that the organization's name is against "public interest." Without registration of its name, SMUG, which was shut down in August 2022 by the authorities, cannot register to operate as a non-governmental organization.

LGBT people have continued to face arrests, evictions, violence, and threats of violence.

## Accountability for Serious Crimes

On February 28, International Criminal Court (ICC) judges ordered payment of over €52 million of reparations for victims in the case against Dominic Ongwen. Ongwen, a former Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) commander, was convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity in 2021. Joseph Kony, the LRA's founding leader and the only individual in Uganda against whom an ICC arrest warrant remains pending, is still at-large.

On August 13, the High Court's International Crimes Division convicted Thomas Kwoyelo, a former LRA commander, of crimes against humanity in Uganda's first domestic war crimes trial. On October 25, he was sentenced to 40 years' imprisonment. In 2018, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights ordered the Ugandan government to

compensate Kwoyelo – who has been in detention since 200 – f or failure to try him within a reasonable time. The government has yet to comply.

On May 30, the United States government imposed travel sanctions on five Ugandan officials, including Peter Elwelu, the former UPDF deputy chief, for "extrajudicial killings" committed by UPDF members under his command. In November 2016, Elwelu led a military raid in Kasese district, killing at least 55 people, which the government has failed to independently investigate or hold anyone accountable for.

## Right to Education

A joint report by Human Rights Watch and the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights found that Uganda's lack of government-funded pre-primary education worsens wealth inequality and has lifelong negative consequences. Only 1 in 10 children aged 3 to 5 are enrolled in licensed pre-primary schools, while 60 percent attend no pre-primary school. Private preschool fees hinder access for low-income families, leading to poorer primary school performance and increased dropout rates for those who miss pre-primary education.

## Government Surveillance

In July, the Ugandan government announced the full rollout of digital number plates for real-time vehicle tracking, starting November 1, with complete implementation by 2025. The Intelligent Transport Monitoring System (ITMS) purportedly aims at enhancing national security through a network of surveillance cameras and mandatory cellular-network-connected tracking devices in vehicles.

Since 2018, the Ugandan government has expanded its surveillance efforts , including through a $126 million CCTV system in 2019 to monitor public spaces and a partnership with Russia's Joint Stock Global Security Company to establish the ITMS.

# Ukraine

Russia's war against Ukraine continued to cause immense civilian suffering. Since its full-scale invasion in February 2022, Russian forces have committed widespread war crimes and other abuses and maintained a climate of fear in Russia-occupied areas of Ukraine. In 2024, Russia's large-scale coordinated attacks on Ukraine's energy grid significantly reduced Ukraine's power-generating capacity, causing country-wide blackouts. The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued four arrest warrants against senior Russian officials for their role in these attacks.

From February 2022 through November 2024, 12,162 Ukrainian civilians were killed and 26,919 injured, according to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. At least 6.7 million Ukrainians fled and remain abroad. Millions more remain internally displaced. Throughout 2024, tens of thousands fled frontline cities in Kharkivska and Donetska regions to other parts of the country due to Russia's continued military advancement.

In June, the European Union opened accession negotiations with Ukraine and presented Ukraine with a negotiating framework that includes rule of law, fundamental rights, and democratic institutions as priority issues in the next step of the accession process.

In August, Ukraine took steps toward becoming a full member of the International Criminal Court, a milestone in advancing global justice.

In June, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled in favour of Ukraine's interstate complaint against Russia, finding Russia responsible for a range of human rights abuses in Crimea. The court found that Russian authorities carried out a pattern of "retaliatory prosecution" against those opposed to Russia's occupation of Crimea, which began in 2014.

In April, the UN Human Rights Council extended the mandate of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, established in 2022, for another year.

In August, Ukraine launched an incursion into Russia's Kursk region. At time of writing, Ukrainian forces reportedly controlled approximately 800 sq km there, including the town of Sudzha, where they established a military administration.

## Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas

Russian forces carried out numerous attacks on densely populated areas in 2024, causing devastation and suffering across Ukraine. Most civilian casualties were caused by explosive weapons with wide area effects, which also damaged residential buildings, hospitals, schools, cultural heritage sites, and other civilian infrastructure.

At least 219 civilians were killed and 1,018 injured in July, making it the deadliest month for civilians in the past two years. Russian forces' strikes on multiple cities on July 8 killed at least 43 civilians, including five children, and injured at least 190. The attacks also caused significant damage to vital civilian infrastructure, including the Okhmatdyt children's hospital in Kyiv, the country's largest children's hospital. Ukrainian authorities reported that the strike on Okhmatdyt killed nine patients and healthcare workers and injured 16 patients, including children. Human Rights Watch and others called for the strike on Okhmatdyt to be investigated as a war crime.

Russia's March 4 strikes on Odesa killed 12 people, including 5 children, and injured 20, according to regional authorities.

As the Russian ground offensive advanced in Kharkivska region, attacks on Kharkiv city and its environs intensified. May attacks using air-dropped bombs and missiles killed, injured, and displaced large numbers of civilians and damaged civilian infrastructure. On May 25, an attack on a busy shopping center killed 19 people and wounded 54, according to Ukrainian authorities. An attack on August 30, according to official reports, killed six civilians and injured 97 and damaged or destroyed 82 residential buildings in five different areas in Kharkiv.

On September 4, Russian air attacks struck a historic residential district in Lviv. The attack killed seven residents, including four from the same family, and wounded 66. The attack also damaged seven educational facilities, including a primary school and three secondary schools, interrupting the education of 1,456 children.

A September attack on an aid distribution site in Viroliubivka, Donetska region, killed three ICRC staff and wounded two. Eighteen humanitarian workers had been killed in Ukraine in 2024 at time of writing. .

From January through December, there were at least 459 recorded attacks on health care infrastructure and personnel, including 349 attacks that impacted healthcare facilities, with 119 personnel and 50 patients wounded. Between February 24, 2022, and December 2024, the World Health Organization documented 2,195 attacks on healthcare facilities in Ukraine, which killed or injured at least 900 healthcare workers and patients.

Between March and August, Russian forces carried out at least 101 attacks on Ukraine's power infrastructure in 17 regions. The attacks significantly reduced electrical supply for the civilian population. Daily outages, sometimes lasting up to 14 hours, put millions of Ukrainians at risk, including people with disabilities and serious health conditions as well as older people who rely on or require electricity-powered services and assistive technologies.

## Landmines and Cluster Munitions

Repeated Russian cluster munition attacks have killed and injured hundreds of Ukrainian civilians since 2022. An April 29 attack on Odesa killed seven civilians and injured dozens more. According to Ukrainian officials, on August 26, Russian forces used cluster munitions to attack power infrastructure. Ukrainian forces have also used cluster munitions and received six transfers of the weapons from the United States between July 2023 and September 2024.

Russian forces have also used landmines extensively, causing civilian harm and contaminating agricultural land. In June, Ukraine announced that it had opened a pre-trial investigation into "the use of anti-personnel mines by unidentified military personnel," following reporting by Human Rights Watch on Ukrainian use of rocket-fired landmines in and around Izium in 2022, when the city was under Russian control.

## Abuses under Russian Occupation

Russian authorities in occupied areas of Ukraine continued to impose Russian legislation, administrative structures, and judicial control, including by appointing federal judges, in violation of international humanitarian law. Russian occupying authorities also pressured residents to obtain Russian passports through harassment, intimidation, arbitrary detention, and restrictions on access to social services essential for rights, such as health care.

Russian authorities continued to suppress the Ukrainian language and education curriculum and impose the Russian curriculum and Russian as the language of instruction in schools in occupied areas of Ukraine.

Throughout the year, Russian authorities in occupied areas severely repressed fundamental rights, including the rights to freedom of speech, association, assembly, and religion. They arbitrarily detained journalists, volunteers, and community and religious leaders who refused to cooperate with the occupying authorities.

Russian authorities continued to conscript Ukrainian civilians in occupied areas or otherwise tried to forcibly enlist them, including those in detention, into the Russian military, which is a war crime.

In March, de facto authorities in Russia-occupied Donetska, Luhanska, Zaporizka, and Khersonska regions adopted new measures allowing the seizure of “unused” property in these regions. The grounds for deeming properties “unused” are vague and enable authorities to seize private homes and apartments arbitrarily. These measures especially affect residents who fled these areas and have found it difficult to maintain their properties remotely.

## Crimea

In Crimea, Russian occupying authorities continued to harass and arbitrarily detain politically active members of the Crimean Tatar community, journalists, and others critical of Russia’s actions in Crimea. Between December 2023 and September 2024, courts in Crimea convicted 254 people of “discrediting Russian armed forces.”

Russian occupying authorities pressured lawyers working on politically motivated cases. In July, Alexey Ladin, a defense attorney representing Crimean Tatars and others in politically motivated cases, was stripped of his law license due to alleged violations of legal ethics. This was the fourth such case in Crimea since Russia occupied the peninsula in 2014.

Authorities continued to deny adequate medical care to Crimean Tatars and others in detention on politically motivated charges. Iryna Danylovych remained in detention in a penal colony in southern Russia without access to adequate medical help. In September 2024, authorities imprisoned Olexandr Sizikov, who has a disability, despite the legal protections Russian law affords to individuals with disabilities. Sizikov had been under house arrest since 2020 on trumped-up terrorism charges related to his alleged affiliation with Hizb ut-Tahrir, a religious group that is banned in Russia but not in Ukraine. In 2023, Sizikov and two Crimean Tatar men were sentenced to prison terms of 12 and 17 years, respectively. The appeals court upheld these sentences in September 2024.

In 2024, Ukrainian authorities secured the release from Russian custody, through prisoner exchanges, of two Crimean Tatar activists: Nariman Dzelial, deputy Chairman of the Mejlis, arrested in Crimea in 2021 on trumped-up sabotage charges, released in June; and Leniye Umerova, a Crimean Solidarity activist arrested in Russia in 2022 on false espionage charges, released in September.

## Prisoners of War

More than six thousand Ukrainian POWs remain in Russian captivity, according to Russian authorities.

Russian forces appear to have summarily executed at least 15 Ukrainian soldiers and possibly six more as they attempted to surrender between December 2023 and February 2024. As of November, Ukrainian authorities were conducting 53 criminal investigations into the extrajudicial execution of 177 Ukrainian POWs since 2022. From December 2023 through August 2024, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU) documented the execution of 34 Ukrainians hors de combat.

Russian forces continued to torture and mistreat Ukrainian POWs and civilians in Russian custody. Most detainees are held in poor prison conditions, without access to adequate

food and medical care. In October, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry concluded that "Russian authorities have committed torture against Ukrainian civilians and prisoners of war as a crime against humanity." Around 80 percent of former POWs reported sexual violence while in Russian captivity.

The HRMMU documented cases of torture and ill-treatment of Russian POWs during the initial stages of captivity, which, with a few exceptions, ceased upon their arrival at official internment facilities. The internment conditions for Russian POWs in Ukrainian pre-trial detention centers and three dedicated camps were "generally compliant with international standards." They were able to maintain contact with their families, have access to legal counsel, and receive regular visits from independent monitors.

As of December, Ukrainian authorities reported that at least 169 Ukrainian POWs and 15 civilians had died in Russian custody since February 2022. Ukrainian groups believe that the actual death toll is higher

Between December 2023 and December 2024, in violation of laws of war, Russian authorities convicted, using terrorism and extremism charges as a pretext, at least 120 Ukrainian POWs for participating in hostilities. Sentences varied from 12 years to life imprisonment.

Since 2022, 59 prisoner exchanges between Ukraine and Russia resulted in the return of 3,956 military service people and civilians.

## Conflict-Related Civilian Detainees

Ukrainian authorities estimated that as of July, Russia was unlawfully detaining over 14,000 Ukrainian civilians.

In April, a report issued under a mechanism of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) extensively documented Russia's abuses against Ukrainian civilians arbitrary detained by Russian authorities since 2022. The report documented extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence, and denial of fair trial guarantees. It concluded that the there was "credible evidence to argue that some of these violations

could, if responsible individuals are identified, amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity."

The HMRUU in October stated that occupying authorities continued to detain people for "what appeared to be legitimate exercise" of the right to religious freedom. Between December 2023 and May 2024, it documented 81 cases of arbitrary detention of civilians. It also documented the death in custody of a priest of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, whose body was found in a local morgue in February. He was last seen two days prior being apprehended by three armed men in military uniforms in the Russia-occupied part of the Khersonska region.

The HMRUU continued to document instances of torture and ill-treatment against civilians in custody in occupied areas and in detention facilities in Russia, with many of the cases taking place in 2022 and 2023.

Close to 55,000 Ukrainians are listed in the unified state registry as missing. At least 16,000 are listed as civilians, with 1,700 having disappeared since 2014.

## Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

As of December, Ukrainian prosecutors had opened 335 cases of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) perpetrated by Russian forces in detention facilities and in occupied territories since February 2022. Women and girls comprise the majority of reported victims. The true number of sexual violence incidents is likely to be higher as stigma, fear of reprisals, and lack of awareness of and access to safe reporting mechanisms prevent survivors from seeking help.

Authorities investigated 88 CRSV cases against Russian servicemen and brought 28 cases involving 40 perpetrators to trial. Three were sentenced to 12 years in prison, and two others to 11 and 10 years, all in absentia. The other cases were pending at time of writing. Ukrainian prosecutors established a coordination center aimed at providing war crimes victims and witnesses, including those affected by CRSV, with psychological, social, and legal support throughout the criminal process.

Sexual violence survivors faced significant barriers in accessing medical, psychosocial, and legal services. To cover urgent needs, they can apply for a one-time assistance payment of US$3,000 through an interim reparations project, launched in 2024. As of November, 308 survivors had received financial support according to Ukraine's commissioner for gender equality.

While sexual violence against Ukrainians in Russian custody disproportionately impacted women detainees, male prisoners, including POWs, were also victims.

Former POWs in Ukraine are entitled to four to eight weeks of rehabilitation before return to active duty. Ukrainian groups believe they need more time for recovery and better access to specialized support services.

In November, Ukraine's parliament adopted a bill that codified the definition of CRSV in national legislation and established mechanisms to provide survivors with interim reparations.

Despite advocacy efforts by civil society, parliament has not yet adopted amendments to criminal legislation concerning the investigation and adjudication of CRSV cases. A draft law, which authorizes the police to investigate such crimes and aims to ensure the confidentiality of survivors' data at all stages of the criminal process, remained pending at time of writing.

In addition to CRSV, the war has increased risks of intimate partner violence, including by men coming back from combat. The number of domestic violence cases increased by 36 percent in 2024 and around 60 percent of perpetrators were men who returned from combat; women's rights organizations claim that courts are reluctant to prosecute soldiers serving their country.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In the first half of 2024, rights groups documented 39 instances of homophobic and transphobic violence in Ukrainian-controlled areas and one instance in Russia-occupied territory. The true number of cases in occupied areas is likely higher, but difficult to

document due to limited access to the area and extremely repressive conditions that inhibit reporting.

Two draft laws, proposing amendments to criminal legislation to address crimes motivated by hate or discrimination and introducing same-sex partnerships, remained pending in parliament. Public support for the changes proposed by the draft legislation grew despite opposition from church communities, according to public surveys. A June survey showed that more than half of Ukrainians support same-sex unions, and over 70 percent believe in equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

## Rule of Law

Authorities continued to vigorously apply anti-collaboration laws, adopted in 2022, which Ukrainian and international groups criticized for being overly broad and vague. Authorities imposed harsh, arbitrary penalties on volunteers, municipal workers, medical personnel, and teachers for working in areas run by Russian occupying forces, despite an absence of evidence they were committing any hostile acts and ignoring the framework of international humanitarian law that protects civilians living under occupation.

Throughout the first half of 2024, the number of prosecutions steadily grew, amidst concerns about prosecutorial bias and compromised right to defense for the accused. In the second half of the year, the number of new investigations reportedly decreased following instructions from the Prosecutor General's Office to adhere to international law. The conviction rate for collaboration cases remained close to 100 percent.

Authorities took steps to impose additional security-related restrictions on public access to information. In May, parliament adopted at first reading a bill that, if adopted into law, would restrict access to court decisions in cases of "special public interest," including national security cases, throughout the period of martial law and one year thereafter. More than 30 Ukrainian rights groups called on parliament to reject the legislation.

In August, parliament adopted a law governing religious organizations that is overly broad and could have far-reaching consequences for Ukrainians' right to religious freedom. The law bans the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine and any religious organization in Ukraine with ties to it. The law could effectively ban the functioning of the Ukrainian

Orthodox Church (UOC), one of the largest religious organizations in Ukraine, resulting in severe practical consequences for UOC parishes and millions of parishioners. Consequences could include: restrictions on ownership and operation of religious properties; barriers to accessing places of worship; and heightened risks of surveillance and prosecution by security services.

## Media Freedom

Independent journalists and media outlets critical of the government faced harassment. In January, unknown assailants broke into the apartment of anti-corruption journalist Yurii Nikonov. A smear campaign against Nikonov followed on several pro-presidential Telegram channels, calling him a Russian agent and accusing him of draft evasion and attempting to discredit Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Also in January, the investigative outlet Bihus.info, known for its investigations into law enforcement officials, reported that its staff had been monitored through video surveillance and telephone wiretapping for months. An investigation into unlawful surveillance of the journalists initiated by Ukraine's security service was ongoing at time of writing.

In early 2024, dozens of employees at Ukrinform, Ukraine's only government national news agency, resigned, citing growing pressure to follow government guidelines on reporting. Following the dismissal of Ukrinform's director, President Zelensky in May issued a decree, appointing a military officer as the agency's director general. Ukraine's independent media watchdog, the Institute of Mass Information, criticized the decision as a threat to press freedom.

In October, the Ukrainian Pravda news outlet accused the President's Office of exerting "long-term and systematic pressure" on its editorial staff and journalists. This pressure included blocking government officials from communicating with the outlet and pressuring businesses to stop advertising with them.

## International Justice

After years of campaigning by national and international human rights groups, Ukraine took important steps to ratify the ICC's founding Rome Statute. Parliament passed a law to

ratify the treaty, but it includes limitations that, if acted on, could shield war criminals from justice. To become a full ICC member, Ukraine still needs to pass legislation to incorporate provisions of the Rome Statute into national law and formally notify the United Nations.

Victims' groups and nongovernmental organizations continued to file universal jurisdiction cases in third countries to address crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine, notably including a conflict-related sexual violence case in Austria and a torture case in Argentina.

# United Arab Emirates

In 2024, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) unjustly convicted and sentenced at least 44 defendants in the second largest unfair mass trial, many of whom had already been serving prison sentences as part of the UAE94 mass trial. The UAE has promoted a public image of tolerance and openness through hosting events like COP28 while restricting scrutiny of its rampant systemic human rights violations and fossil fuel expansion. Migrant workers in the UAE face widespread abuses and exposure to dangerous heat-related health risks.

## Freedom of Expression, Assembly, and Association

The UAE places severe restrictions on the rights to free expression, association, and assembly. Scores of critics are serving lengthy sentences in UAE prisons following unfair trials on vague and broad charges that violate their rights to free expression and association.

Emirati authorities convicted at least 44 defendants out of 84 human rights defenders and dissidents following an unfair trial and despite allegations of being held in prolonged solitary confinement. The 84 individuals were accused of terrorism-related crimes for their involvement in establishing an independent advocacy group, the Justice and Dignity Committee, in 2010.

Out of the 44 defendants whose conviction has been confirmed, 4 people were sentenced to 15 years in prison, 40 to life in prison, including academic Nasser bin Ghaithv, Abdulsalam Darwish al-Marzouqi, and Sultan Bin Kayed al-Qasimi, and at least one defendant was acquitted, according to the Emirates Detainees Advocacy Center. At least 60 of the defendants, including al-Marzouqi and al-Qasimi, were already convicted in the UAE94 case for their involvement with the Justice and Dignity Committee.

The mass trial was characterized by significant violations of due process and fair trial standards, such as restricted access to case materials and information, inadequate legal representation, judges influencing witness testimony, breaches of the principle of double jeopardy, credible reports of severe abuse and mistreatment, and hearings conducted behind closed doors.

Among the defendants is prominent Emirati activist Ahmed Mansoor, member of the Board of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) and of the Advisory Committee for Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa Division.

Emirati authorities have also arbitrarily detained, convicted, and sentenced 57 Bangladeshi protesters in the UAE to long prison sentences in rapid trials based on their participation in peaceful protests in solidarity with student protesters in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi protesters imprisoned in the UAE were pardoned and released in September 2024.

UAE's Federal Penal Code and the Cybercrime Law are used to silence dissidents, journalists, activists, and anyone the authorities perceived to be critical of the government, its policies, or its representatives. These laws have led to the complete closure of civic space, severe restrictions on freedom of expression, both online and offline, and the criminalization of peaceful dissent.

Emirati authorities have used these broadly worded laws to imprison citizens and residents for peaceful social media posts that were deemed to be critical of the governments in the UAE, Egypt, and Jordan. Jordanian activist Ahmed al-Atoum, who worked as a teacher in Abu Dhabi, is serving a 10-year sentence for peaceful social media activity.

## Sanctions

The UN Panel of Experts on the Sudan found allegations of UAE support to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to be "credible" and said that "the transfers of arms and ammunition into Darfur" that they documented "constituted violations of the arms embargo." Human Rights Watch identified military equipment used in Sudan produced by companies registered in China, Iran, Russia, Serbia, and the UAE.

Human Rights Watch has called on the UN Security Council to renew and ensure the enforcement of the mandate of the Sudan 1591 sanctions regime, publicly condemn individual governments that violate the existing UN Security Council arms embargo on Darfur, and impose sanctions on individuals or entities who are in violation of the arms embargo, including individuals and entities in the UAE. The UK, which is penholder on Sudan at the Security Council, has failed to publicly call out the UAE for its support to the RSF.

## Migrant Workers

Employers hold disproportionate control over migrant workers under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, preventing them from changing jobs without the employer's consent. Employers can file false "absconding" charges even when workers leave to escape abuse, causing them to risk detention and deportation. Migrant workers continue to face widespread abuses like wage theft, illegal recruitment fees, and passport confiscation, which leave workers in situations that may amount to forced labor. The UAE also bans trade unions, which prevents workers from demanding stronger labor protections. The UAE still does not have a non-discriminatory minimum wage.

Migrant workers play an indispensable role in the UAE workforce, yet the government fails to protect essential workers from climate change-related risks.

Outdoor migrant workers in the UAE are among the most vulnerable to heat-related illnesses and death. The UAE continues to rely solely on a summer midday work ban as the primary heat protection measure, despite evidence of its ineffectiveness in protecting workers.

Beyond inadequate heat protections, migrant workers are also subject to serious labor abuses like wage theft and exorbitant recruitment fees which affect their ability to send home remittances to their families back home in climate-vulnerable countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, including to address family hardship during extreme weather events often linked to climate change.

Domestic workers, who are excluded for the labor law, are even more vulnerable to exploitation, including being confined to homes or agency offices, wage theft, and verbal, physical, and sexual violence by employers and recruiters despite legal reforms that prohibit discrimination, violence, and recruitment fees. The protections under the law on domestic workers are still weaker than the labor law and fall short of international standards.

Other governments continue to prioritize trade and other strategic interests with the UAE over human rights. The new UK government has announced the resumption of negotiations for a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council, of which the UAE is a member, despite ongoing concerns about the lack of transparency, oversight, and inclusion of concrete human rights protections and commitments, particularly for migrant workers.

## Climate Change Policy and Impacts

The UAE, one of the world's largest oil producers, sought to position itself as a global leader on climate and health issues at the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP28 despite plans to expand its fossil fuel operations, undermining efforts to confront the climate crisis and protect human rights.

The UAE's plan to increase fossil fuel production is inconsistent with the government's commitments under the Paris Agreement that aims to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius to avoid the worst impacts of the global climate crisis.

Fossil fuel extraction and use in the UAE are a source of toxic air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, which create major health risks for people living in the UAE and contributes to the global climate crisis. Research shows that toxic air linked to the burning of fossil fuels adversely impacts the respiratory, cardiovascular, and nervous systems.

It is extremely difficult to scrutinize the weakness of the government's air pollution policies or talk about the sources of air pollution due to laws and policies that criminalize peaceful dissent.

## Women's Rights

The UAE carried out limited reforms such as prohibiting discrimination based on sex and gender and removing a legal obligation on women to obey their husbands. However, those reforms fall short from uprooting all forms of discrimination against women, especially male guardianship over women.

The legal definition of domestic violence in UAE law reaffirms male guardians' legal right to discipline their wives, female relatives, and children to an extent that authorities find acceptable. The law also does not criminalize marital rape.

Despite minor amendments to the UAE's Federal Personal Status Law, a woman in the UAE can still lose her right to financial maintenance from her husband if she refuses to have sexual relations with him without a "lawful excuse," abandons the marital home, or prevents her husband from entering the marital home. Under the law, wives are obliged to maintain the house and its contents and breastfeed their children unless there is an

impediment. While the amendments remove discrimination in law, they still allow for judges to discriminate against women in practice. This law applies to all Muslim UAE nationals and foreign nationals. Non-Muslims can apply their own religious laws.

The law also discriminated against Emirati mothers who remain unable to pass their nationality to their children on an equal basis with Emirati men. In addition, the law grants the father default guardianship of children with the authority to make important decisions for the child. The UAE authorities confirmed to Human Rights Watch that it is the obligation of the father, or whoever has legal guardianship over the child according to the child's nationality, to apply for their birth certificate and passport.

Abu Dhabi issued a Law on Civil Marriage and Its Effects in Abu Dhabi providing non-Muslim foreigner couples residing in Abu Dhabi with civil marriages and mostly equal rights between spouses relating to marriage, divorce, and decisions relating to children. This law creates discrimination against women based on their religion, nationality, and where they reside within the UAE. To avoid discrimination Abu Dhabi and the other emirates of the UAE federation should extend these rights to all citizens.

The Federal Penal Code criminalizes consensual nonmarital sex and abortions under overly broad "morality offences" that disproportionately affect women as pregnancy can serve as evidence of the so-called crime.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The UAE's Federal Penal Code criminalizes vaguely defined acts, allowing the authorities to arrest people for a wide range of behaviors, including public displays of affection, gender nonconforming expressions, and campaigns promoting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. The law also criminalizes "sodomy" with an adult male.

# United Kingdom

In July 2024, a new Labour government was elected following more than a decade of backsliding on human rights by previous governments.

The UK faces a cost-of-living crisis which has yet to be addressed by policies that safeguard the economic, social and cultural rights of people from low-income households, particularly their rights to food, housing, and social security.

Laws criminalizing protests undermine democratic rights. Police in 2024 widened and normalized the use of facial recognition surveillance technologies, including at peaceful protests and gatherings.

While the Labour government withdrew the previous UK government's plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, legislation violating refugee rights remained and anti-migrant narratives continued to be mainstreamed in politics and the media.

UK authorities have yet to fully right the wrongs committed against the Windrush generation and the Indigenous Chagossian people.

## Rule of Law

Several laws, including the 2023 Public Order Act and the 2022 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act, severely increase police powers and undermine free speech, peaceful assembly, and democratic rights in the UK. At time of writing, the Labour government had yet to repealing these and other repressive laws.

In 2024, the UK continued to crack down on and criminalize climate protests. The police were granted greater powers in April as part of the Public Order Act to restrict peaceful protests "to clamp down on disruptive protesters."

In January, the UN special rapporteur on environmental defenders under the Aarhus Convention expressed serious concerns about "increasingly severe crackdowns on environmental defenders in the United Kingdom."

In May, the High Court ruled that anti-protest measures introduced in 2023, allowing authorities to clamp down on any protests deemed 'more than minor' disruptions, unlawfully restricted protest, a decision described by civil society groups as a "huge victory for democracy." The Labour government chose to continue the legal challenge against the ruling brought by the previous government, with the appeal scheduled for December.

Also in May, the UN Human Rights Committee called on the UK to "end the use of facial recognition and other mass surveillance technologies by law enforcement agencies at protests, in order to safeguard privacy, non-discrimination, freedom of expression and association and assembly rights for protesters."

## Asylum-Seekers and Migrants

The Labour government ended the previous government's "Rwanda scheme," aimed at transferring asylum seekers from the UK to Rwanda, and committed to processing about 90,000 backlogged asylum claims. It appeared to mirror the previous government's deterrence-oriented approach by saying it would establish a new border security command unit targeting people smugglers and introduce a Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill to provide for fast-track returns for individuals coming from so-called safe countries, which could limit individualized assessments of risks on return.

The 2023 Illegal Migration Act and 2022 Nationality and Borders Act remain on the books, legalizing pushbacks at sea and offshore processing, failing to provide safe and legal pathways to the UK, and criminalizing those seeking asylum through irregular routes.

## Poverty and Inequality

Taking office during an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, a key test for the Labour government is developing plans to support the millions of people living in poverty and struggling to afford essentials.

The Labour government pledged to enact the "socio-economic duty" provision of the Equality Act—pending since 2010—which would require government bodies to act to

remedy deep, structural inequalities. OECD figures suggest that the UK has among the highest levels of income inequality in Europe.

However, at this writing, the UK had refused to abolish the two-child limit in social security policy, a key driver of child poverty, despite mounting pressure. It also had ended winter fuel payments for most people aged 66 and older in England and Wales, reportedly without any impact assessment. The Scottish government followed suit. Civil society called on the Labour government to ensure that its pledge to review Universal Credit, the main form of social security, is carried out in line with the principles of the Essentials Guarantee to ensure everyone receiving social security support can enjoy their right to an adequate standard of living.

## Racism and Ethnic Discrimination

In July and August, the UK was rocked by far-right, racist, and Islamophobic violence across the country, targeting migrants, Muslims and ethnic minorities, with damage to mosques and asylum-seeker accommodation. In Rotherham, asylum seekers were trapped in their accommodation as rioters smashed windows and set the building on fire. The violence was fueled by misinformation online, wrongly blaming migrants, Muslims, and ethnic minorities for economic woes instead of political leaders. As a reaction to the racist riots, many people took to the streets in anti-racism protests to show solidarity with affected communities.

While the Labour government maintained a focus on action to address a worrying rise in antisemitism, it has yet to demonstrate a commitment to address root causes of antisemitism, systemic racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia in the UK, beyond a 'law and order' approach that focuses on prosecuting racist hate crimes.

Politicians and media outlets have contributed to a hostile environment towards ethnic and racial minorities by reproducing anti-migrant, xenophobic, and Islamophobic narratives.

Six years since the "Windrush Scandal," the Windrush generation is finally seeing steps towards justice. In October, the Labour government announced commitments to right the wrongs affecting thousands from the Windrush generation, including being denied access

to housing, health care and employment based on mistaken determinations that they were not British citizens. The commitments include funding to facilitate access to the 2019 Windrush compensation scheme and the appointment of a dedicated Windrush commissioner.

On October 3, 2024, the UK and Mauritius announced a political agreement, subject to finalization in a treaty, recognizing Mauritian sovereignty over the Chagos Islands and purporting to allow Chagossians to return to some islands – excluding the largest island Diego Garcia – and committing to establishing a trust fund for the Chagossians. Chagossians criticized the agreement over both governments' failures adequately to consult with them.

More than seven years later, no person or company has been held accountable for the deadly fire in 2017 in Grenfell Tower, which housed predominantly Black and ethnic minority people. An inquiry found systemic failures by central and local government and "dishonesty" by manufacturers of flammable cladding on the building led to 71 "avoidable" deaths.

## Disability Rights

The UK's Mental Health Act continued to violate the rights of people with disabilities.

In May 2024, the UN Human Rights Committee published findings criticizing the UK authorities' practice of arbitrarily detaining and involuntarily treating people with disabilities, including children, under the act based solely on their actual or perceived disability. The committee expressed concern that the average length of stay for people with learning disabilities and autism detained under the act is over two years. In July, the Labour government committed to legislative changes that limit such involuntary detention.

The UN review followed an investigation by *The Independent* and *Sky News* that found almost 20,000 sexual abuse incidents were reported in NHS-run mental health units in the last five years. NHS data indicated that over 2,000 people with learning disabilities and autism were still in in-patient units as of August 2024, despite a commitment to reduce the number of inpatient beds by 50 percent from March 2015 to March 2024 and develop community-based services.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In April, the NHS published the Cass Review, an independent assessment of gender identity services for children and young adults in the UK. It recommended an expansion of access to gender identity services for transgender young people in England, while recommending strict limits on their care. Experts criticized the review for inaccuracies, cherry picking evidence, and ethical concerns. Rights groups warned that anti-trans groups were using it to spread misinformation. Following the review, the NHS banned puberty blockers—defying established medical standards. In August, the British Medical Association urged the NHS to lift the ban and pause other recommendations from the review.

# United States

Racial justice remained a pressing human rights concern in the United States in 2024. The US ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination nearly 60 years ago but has done far too little to implement its provisions. Living legacies of slavery and the slaughter and dispossession of Native peoples remain largely unaddressed.

Critical human rights issues in 2024 included abusive border policies and denials of the rights of migrants and asylum seekers, expansion of sometimes deadly constraints on reproductive rights, new threats to LGBT rights, and restrictions on voting rights, abuses often targeting or falling heaviest on communities of color.

Donald Trump was reelected as president in November. His previous record in office and explicit campaign promises raised serious concerns about the threats his second term as president would pose to a wide range of human rights and to the democratic institutions tasked with upholding them.

## Structural Racism and Other Discrimination

In June, the Oklahoma Supreme Court dismissed a lawsuit brought by the two last survivors of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. Calling the decision a miscarriage of justice, the survivors have requested a federal investigation.

Although efforts to create a federal reparations study commission did not advance in 2024, several state legislatures proposed measures to address historical injustices that manifest the legacies of enslavement for Black communities.

In June, a federal judge in Oklahoma City struck down part of a state law that censors teaching certain gender and race topics, providing a bright spot in a year with a spate of efforts to censor the teaching of Black history in several states.

Students, parents, and educators continue to oppose laws that undermine democracy by restricting classroom discussions of race, history, sexual orientation, and gender identity,

and by banning books by authors addressing these issues. Human Rights Watch and partners documented the harmful effects of these laws and asked the federal government to intervene in school censorship and discrimination.

April marked the 10th anniversary of the Flint water crisis, a policy-induced disaster where state decisions caused a dramatic increase in lead levels in a Michigan water supply, contributing to widespread and permanent harms especially among children in predominantly Black and Brown communities. Water pipes throughout Flint remain contaminated and there is no deadline to complete remediation.

Indigenous groups and partners, continued the fight to halt the construction of a lithium mine at Thacker Pass (Peehee Mu'huh) in Nevada. They contend the mine is being built on religious and culturally significant land where a US army unit massacred their ancestors in 1865, and will harm the area flora, wildlife, and water supply.

The region of Louisiana widely known as "Cancer Alley," once dominated by plantations worked by enslaved people, hosts approximately 200 fossil fuel and petrochemical plants, reportedly the largest concentration in the Western Hemisphere.

The facilities are the largest source of stationary greenhouse gas emissions in Louisiana and discharge deadly toxic pollutants, disproportionately harming the health of Black residents, many of whom are descended from these same enslaved communities. People living in parts of Cancer Alley have the highest risk of cancer from industrial air pollution in the US, more than seven times the national average. New research revealed the toll of air pollution on maternal, reproductive, and newborn health there, with low birthweight and preterm birth rates as much as triple the US average.

In April 2024, the Environmental Protection Agency announced nationwide industrial regulations that will require hundreds of fossil fuel and petrochemical operations across the country—including 26 in Cancer Alley—to curb toxic pollutants, reduce flaring, and increase air monitoring in surrounding communities, including reducing emissions of the most toxic chemicals by as much as 80 percent. The government also announced over US$150 million to support Louisiana's transition to renewable energy.

## Criminal Legal System

The US has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world, with roughly 2 million people held in jails, prisons, and immigration detention facilities on any given day, and millions more on parole and probation. Many children continue to be prosecuted as adults in all 50 states and the US remains the only country in the world to sentence child offenders to die in prison. Racial disparities persist at every point of the criminal system, including police stops, searches, arrests, charging, and sentencing.

The US carried out the death penalty in eight states reaching the grim figure of 1607 executions since 1976. Alabama conducted two executions using nitrogen gas, an untested and inhumane method. method.

Violent crime rates dropped in 2023 and continued to drop in 2024, yet misinformation and misleading narratives continued, feeding calls for the rollback of reforms and new restrictions on pretrial release. The latter included a law in the state of Georgia prohibiting nonprofit organizations and charities from posting more than three cash bonds yearly; such bonds allow accused persons to be freed from custody unless and until actually convicted of a crime.

In its *Grants Pass v. Johnson* decision, the Supreme Court empowered localities to ticket, arrest, and even imprison unhoused people for inhabiting public spaces, including in Los Angeles, where unhoused people make up about 1 percent of the population but 38 percent of all arrests and citations by police.

As of November, police had killed 1225 people nationwide, exceeding the documented number from 2023.

## Immigrants and Asylum Seekers

August marked the 30th year of use of "prevention through deterrence" tactics that funnel immigrants away from established crossings at the US-Mexico border to more remote areas, increasing deaths and disappearances.

In June, President Joe Biden suspended the right to make an asylum claim for immigrants who entered at the southwest border without authorization; it could only be reinstated when

certain conditions are met. In September, he increased the conditions to be met before the suspension could be lifted. The Department of Homeland Security also issued a regulation establishing that asylum seekers who cross the border without authorization "will generally be ineligible for asylum, absent exceptionally compelling circumstances." These measures violate US obligations under international human rights and refugee law.

In 2023, the administration introduced a regulation requiring asylum seekers to use the government's CBP One app, and limiting asylum access for people who cross the border between ports of entry or who do not seek asylum in a country of transit. Although 765,000 people from January 2023 through July 2024 were able to schedule appointments using the app, many lacked access and others reported difficulties using the app. Individuals waited months in Mexico, which exposed them to abuse and violence.

Texas' Operation Lone Star, a program which purports to enforce federal immigration laws, has led to injuries and deaths, racial discrimination, abusive detention conditions, and a chilling effect on freedoms of association and expression. Texas National Guard members fired pepper spray projectiles on migrants, including children.

## Democracy and the Right to Vote

In May, the Supreme Court issued a decision allowing racial discrimination in the drawing of voting maps, dismissing the voices of Black voters challenging gerrymandering. In June, in *Trump v. United States*, justices ruled that former President Donald Trump could not be criminally indicted for at least some of his actions trying to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. The latter opinion established a broad scope of presidential immunity for "official acts" while in office, a decision with potentially devastating consequences for democracy and human rights if interpreted to give presidents an absolute shield from prosecution for illegal attempts to overturn election results, serious human rights abuses, or comparably egregious misconduct.

The US continues to deny many people the right to vote because of contact with the criminal legal system, while most countries in the world never or rarely deny the right to vote because of a conviction. In April, Nebraska passed a reform that would restore the right to vote to at least 7,000 people with felony convictions. The law was set to go into effect in July 2024 but currently faces legal challenges.

More than one million US citizens, many with disabilities, have restricted political rights due to guardianship. At least seven states bar those under guardianship from voting, using outdated, sometimes denigrating laws. Despite conflicting with the Americans With Disabilities Act and other federal laws, these statutes remain unchallenged in courts.

## Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights

The Supreme Court's 2022 decision eliminating the constitutional right to abortion continued to have far-reaching and often devastating impacts on health and lives.

At this writing, 12 states had banned abortion and others harshly restricted access. People seeking pregnancy-related health services, including for miscarriages or obstetric complications, experienced life-threatening delays and denials of care. Laws forcing parental involvement in abortion continued to harm young people under 18.

Stark differences between states led to a surge in difficult and costly travel across state lines for care.

Abortion bans and restrictions disproportionately harmed Black, Indigenous, and other people of color.

Some states moved to safeguard and expand abortion access. Voters in seven states approved ballot measures creating protections for abortion access. New York joined several other states in allowing Medicaid coverage for doula care.

Racial disparities in access to health care continue to impact women of color, and especially Black women in the South, who face a disproportionate risk of dying from cervical cancer, a highly preventable and treatable disease.

Maternal health inequities remain a serious problem. Maternal death rates in 2022 were significantly higher for Black women (49.5 per 100,000) than white women (19 per 100,000). Preterm birth rates also remained higher for Black women than for other women. The percentage of people accessing prenatal care in the first trimester of pregnancy declined.

## Child Labor

Children continue to be injured and killed while working in dangerous and exploitative conditions in meat processing plants, factories, and other locations. The Labor Department reported an 88 percent increase in child labor violations since 2019. As of November, eight states had enacted legislation in 2024 weakening child labor protections. Congress and the Biden administration failed to pass legislation or update regulations to protect children working in agriculture, the deadliest sector for child workers.

## LGBT Rights

Many state lawmakers continue to target the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. Fewer than half of US states have statutory protections prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The US has failed to enact comprehensive federal legislation that expressly protects LGBT people from discrimination in areas such as education, housing, public accommodations, and federally funded programs.

The rights of transgender individuals, especially teens, continued to be a political lightning rod in the US in 2024 at the expense of their health and wellbeing. As of September 2024, 26 states banned at least some best-practice medical care for transgender children under age 18, and six criminalized such care as a felony offense. Twenty-six states prohibited transgender children from participating in sports consistent with their gender identity, 11 states banned discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools, and 8 states required school personnel to disclose students' gender identity to their parents. Thirteen states prohibited transgender people from using bathrooms consistent with their gender identity in schools, with some of these bans encompassing other public facilities as well.

## Older People's Rights

In April, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services released minimum staffing standards for nursing homes. University of Pennsylvania research showed their implementation could save thousands of lives annually. The American Health Care Association, other nursing home providers, and 20 states filed lawsuits to block implementation.

## Technology and Rights

The US has no federal data protection law, leaving personal data open to abuse by government and private actors.

Federal agencies are considering regulation of artificial intelligence and data protection, including its use for national security purposes. Binding laws and regulations are necessary and should be informed by civil society and public inputs, and developed independently from private companies.

Federal agencies took further action against surveillance companies involved in abusive practices. The Commerce Department announced and then withdrew sanctions against Canadian surveillance software company, Sandvine. The Treasury Department issued targeted sanctions against Intellexa, a Greek company that develops Predator spyware, which has been misused worldwide to target journalists human rights workers and opposition politicians.

The Department of Homeland Security purchased software from the Israeli spyware company, Paragon Solutions, for use by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The Biden administration then stopped that contracted work to evaluate its legality under the 2023 executive order prohibiting the use of spyware.

## Significant US Foreign Policy Developments

The Biden administration did not consistently include human rights considerations in foreign policy. It sent military aid to governments that violated international law like Egypt and Israel, sold arms to autocratic governments like Saudi Arabia, and sent Ukraine indiscriminate cluster munitions and anti-personnel landmines. President Biden hosted heads of state from Kenya and United Arab Emirates without public condemnation of those governments' rights violations, and was reluctant to use leverage with allies like Rwanda and Ethiopia to curb their abuses.

However, US sanctions against a former Haitian president, Ugandan officials, leaders of the abusive Rapid Support Forces in Sudan, and violent Israeli settlers in the West Bank, were important for accountability and to deter further abuses. The US successfully pushed for the release of political prisoners in Nicaragua and Vietnam, deployed a special envoy for Sudan,

helped prevent the overturning of Guatemala's 2023 elections, and led the creation of a mission to protect civilians in Haiti.

# Uzbekistan

Government authorities increasingly stifled human rights activism in 2024, targeting activists, bloggers, and others with unfounded criminal charges, including for "insulting the president online." At least two bloggers remained in forced psychiatric detention in violation of their rights to liberty, security, and health. Promised legal reforms stalled. Those responsible for security forces' use of excessive force to quell July 2022 protests in Karakalpakstan, an autonomous republic, continued to evade justice. Consensual same-sex relations between men remained criminalized. Impunity for torture and ill-treatment and domestic violence remained the norm.

## Accountability and Justice

Authorities took no steps in 2024 to hold any senior officials accountable for the excessive force used in July 2022 to suppress protests in the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, in which 21 people died. A so-called "independent commission" tasked with investigating human rights violations during and after the protests had not issued a report at time of writing.

Uzbekistan's Supreme Court, on July 23, rejected the appeal of wrongfully imprisoned Karakalpak activist and lawyer Dauletmurat Tazhimuratov, who was sentenced to 16 years in prison in January 2023. Rights groups have repeatedly raised concerns about his treatment in prison.

## Civil Society

Authorities in 2024 increasingly targeted outspoken activists with unfounded criminal charges and blocked independent monitors' access to the country.

On February 22, Uzbekistan's Supreme Court ruled that Alga Karakalpakstan, an opposition group in Karakalpakstan, is "extremist" and banned its activities in Uzbekistan. In late May, a Karakalpakstan court sentenced Parakhat Musapbarov to six years in prison for "membership in a banned extremist organization."

On April 30, police arrested Dilmurod Mukhitdinov, a human rights activist from Andijan, on criminal charges of extortion and degrading the honor and dignity of a person. Other local activists expressed concern that his arrest is linked to his collaboration with Achchiq TV, a local news agency known for reporting critical of government. Mukhitdinov remained under arrest pending trial at time of writing.

In May, the rights defender Klara Sakharova was subject to online harassment, with an anonymous user threatening her and sending obscene insults.

On July 18, a Kashkadarya court sentenced the activists Dildora Khakimova and Nargiza Keldiyorova to more than six years in prison on dubious extortion charges after they criticized corruption in the education system in Kashkadarya. An appeals court on November 6 upheld the verdict.

In early April, police stopped ArtDocFest Asia claiming a violation of the rules on holding mass events, and fined Timur Karpov, the founder of the art gallery where the festival was held, for a violation of "notification procedures" under the administrative code.

On September 19, Justice Ministry officials broke up a Civic Solidary Platform event of women nongovernmental organization leaders. Authorities threatened to bring administrative charges against Tolekan Ismailova, a human rights defender from Kyrgyzstan, for holding an "unsanctioned" NGO activity.

Twice in 2024, Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry left pending without answer applications for a visa to Uzbekistan submitted by a Human Rights Watch senior Central Asia researcher, preventing her from visiting Uzbekistan.

Parliament in June passed a law allowing authorities to designate as "undesirable" foreigners or stateless people whose speech or actions are perceived to "contradict the state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security of the Republic of Uzbekistan, provoke interstate, social, national, racial, and religious discord, discrediting the honor, dignity, or history of the people of Uzbekistan" and ban them from the country for up to five years. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed the law on November 15.

The UN special rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, Balakrishnan Rajagopal, upon concluding his trip to Uzbekistan in August, expressed concern that "victims of forced evictions, housing rights defenders, lawyers, bloggers and journalists reporting about arbitrary housing demolitions are subject to intimidation, prosecuted or detained on dubious grounds."

## Freedom of Speech

Uzbek authorities intensified their crackdown on free speech, imprisoning critical bloggers on spurious criminal charges and imprisoning citizens for up to five years for "insulting the president online." Twenty-seven-year-old D. Tursunov was sentenced to five years in prison in March 2024 for comments he left online about the president. Authorities continue to hold, in forced psychiatric detention, the blogger Valijon Kalonov, who had criticized President Mirziyoyev in advance of presidential elections in 2021 and whom police arrested in August 2021 on charges of "insulting the president online." Defamation and insult remain criminal offenses, despite President Mirziyoyev's pledge in 2020 to decriminalize both offenses.

On April 30, a court found Uzbekistan national Sevara Shaydullaeva guilty of "intentionally storing and distributing materials containing an open call to overthrow the constitutional order of Uzbekistan" after she had sent her mother a video clip of Uzbekistan's late President Islam Karimov speaking to Islamists in 1991, which she had downloaded from YouTube. She was sentenced to 30 months' restricted freedom.

## Torture and Ill-treatment

Torture and ill-treatment persist as a serious problem and police beat detainees with impunity. In May, Tashkent police apparently beat Denis Nikolaev, a detainee, with a mop while he was handcuffed. In June, one police officer was arrested in connection with the death of Dilmurod Yusupvaliev, who succumbed to injuries he apparently sustained while in custody at a Tashkent region police station having been detained for allegedly "violating public order." His brother, who was detained along with him, said eight police officers were involved in the beating and called for more arrests.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee in March called on Uzbekistan “to take robust measures to eradicate torture and ill-treatment.”

## Freedom of Religion

Uzbek authorities restrict religious freedom by preventing registration of religious communities, subjecting former religious prisoners to arbitrary controls, and prosecuting Muslims on broad and vaguely worded extremism-related charges. At least two groups of up to 23 Muslims were arrested in 2024 for alleged membership in Hizb-ut Tahrir, a religious movement banned in Uzbekistan, a return to a repressive practice common under late president Islam Karimov. One of the cases had gone to trial at time of writing.

Khayrullo Tursunov, who previously served time in prison for exercising his right to freedom of religion, was re-arrested in mid-June. He remained in pre-trial detention at time of writing. In February, a court fined two Jehovah’s Witnesses for proselytizing.

Uzbekistan’s parliament is considering a draft law that would ban and introduce punishments for parents or guardians who allow their children to receive "illegal" religious education before the age of 18. Media and religious freedom watchdogs continued to report intermittent incidents in which police detain men wearing long beards and forcibly shave and fine them.

## Forced Labor

Independent labor rights monitors reported in February 2024, that in districts with a shortage of cotton pickers, officials used coercion to recruit pickers to fulfill quotas during the 2023 harvest. The risk of forced labor persists in the cotton sector, with continued state control over the cotton harvest and of the agricultural sector more generally, and still inadequate protection of the right to freedom of association. Agricultural workers and farmers continued to face constraints on their right to organize.

In January, an Internal Affairs Ministry official threatened an Uzbek Forum monitor with criminal charges and said the monitor was putting their life in danger by reporting on labor rights violations in the agricultural sector. On April 18, a pro-government blogger and another man intimidated and insulted human rights defenders Umida Niyazova and

Sharifa Madrakhimova while they were carrying out labor rights monitoring in the Fergana region. The men accused Niyazova of "organizing information attacks against Uzbekistan." Authorities have not brought the perpetrators to account in either incident.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Uzbekistan continues to ignore calls to decriminalize consensual same-sex sexual conduct between men. Police target gay and bisexual men and transgender women for arbitrary detention, prosecution, and imprisonment. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people face discrimination and harassment from state and non-state actors. In early November, leader of the Milliy Tiklanish party and member of parliament Alisher Kadyrov reported that his party was working on a draft law banning anti-LGBT propaganda.

# Venezuela

In the lead-up to Venezuela's July 28 presidential elections, authorities intensified repression, targeting human rights defenders and opposition members with arrests and disqualifications, and tightening restrictions on civic space.

Following the election, international monitors raised serious concerns about the electoral council's claim that Nicolás Maduro was re-elected. As thousands of protesters took to the streets, authorities responded with a brutal crackdown, including killings, arrests and other broader repressive tactics.

Over 20 million Venezuelans live in multidimensional poverty with inadequate access to rights-essential goods and services, including food and essential medicines. Many are forced to adopt extreme survival strategies, including fleeing the country. Roughly 8 million Venezuelans have left since 2014.

## Elections

On July 28, Venezuelans voted in the presidential election in large numbers, despite irregular government actions and human rights violations, including arrests of opposition members and arbitrary disqualifications of opposition candidates, such as opposition leader Maria Corina Machado.

On the night of the election, Venezuela's electoral council declared that incumbent Nicolás Maduro had won the election with over 51 percent of the vote. To date, the council has not released the precinct-level tally sheets from the election, nor conducted the electoral audits or citizen verification processes required by law.

The United Nations Panel of Electoral Experts and the Carter Center, which observed the elections in Venezuela at the request of the electoral authority, said the process lacked transparency and integrity and questioned the declared results. They granted credibility to the precinct-level tally sheets that the opposition made public which, according to the Carter Center, indicated that opposition candidate Edmundo González had won the election by a significant margin.

On September 2, a judge issued an arrest warrant against González for "conspiracy," "incitement to disobedience" and other crimes. González was forced to flee the country.

The United Nations, the Organization of American States, the European Union, the United States, and several Latin American and European governments urged Maduro to release the precinct-level tally sheets, carry out an "impartial verification" of the results, and respect the will of the people.

The governments of Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico have promoted talks with the Venezuelan government, with limited results.

## Repression of Dissent

Venezuela experienced a ramp-up in repression ahead of the election, including arrests of opposition members—many of whom remain arbitrarily detained, their whereabouts unknown—arbitrary disqualifications of opposition candidates, and efforts to further restrict civic space.

In January, the government launched a so-called "Bolivarian Fury" plan with the alleged aim of preventing coup attempts. Shortly after, unidentified people vandalized the offices of media outlets, civil society groups and opposition parties. From December 2023 to March 2024, at least 48 people, including members of the military, human rights defenders, journalists, and members of the political opposition, were detained for alleged conspiracy.

Following the announcement of election results, thousands of protesters took to the streets in largely peaceful protests to demand a fair counting of the votes. People, including in low-income areas traditionally supportive of Chavismo—the political movement created by the late president, Hugo Chávez—protested in large numbers. Authorities responded with violence and widespread abuses, including killings, arbitrary detention and prosecution, and harassment of critics.

Human Rights Watch received credible reports of 23 killings of protesters and bystanders and identified evidence linking security forces and pro-government armed groups known as "colectivos" with several of these killings. The local pro bono group Foro Penal, reported over 1,900 "political prisoners" who have been arrested since July 29, including

42 adolescents, aged 14 to 17, who remained behind bars by the end of November. These arrests contribute to a total of 17,882 politically motivated arrests since 2014, according to Foro Penal.

Many of the arrests occurred as part of a security forces operation that the government calls "Operation Knock Knock" (Operación Tun Tun), which involves mass detentions of protesters, targeted arrests of critics, and the use of social media by government and security forces to instill fear in the population. The government also encouraged citizens to report on demonstrators through apps like Ven App, and security forces conducted abusive raids, especially in low-income communities.

Prosecutors have charged hundreds with sometimes broadly defined crimes carrying harsh sentences, such as "incitement to hatred," "resistance to authority," and "terrorism."

Detainees are often kept in incommunicado detention for weeks, have been denied the right to be represented by a private lawyer of their choosing, and have been presented at virtual hearings, which poses significant problems for the fair administration of justice. Some, including adolescents, have reportedly been beaten and subject to other ill-treatment in custody.

The office of the UN Secretary General, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (FFM) and some UN independent experts criticized the post-electoral repression. The FFM said the government operated in a "deliberate manner" and deployed "the harshest and most violent mechanisms of its repressive apparatus" generating a "widespread climate of fear among the population."

## Impunity

The judiciary stopped functioning as an independent branch of government in 2004, when then-President Chávez passed a judicial reform and packed the Supreme Court with his supporters. The Court has since supported the executive branch in repression of critics. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported persistent

delays in the investigations into deaths that occurred during protests and in security operations and said that investigations "have not addressed the chain of responsibility."

On February 15, the Venezuelan government announced its decision to suspend the activities of the OHCHR in the country. This decision came after the office expressed concern regarding the detention of renowned human rights defender Rocío San Miguel, noting it could amount to an enforced disappearance.

On March 1, an International Criminal Court appeals chamber authorized the court's prosecutor to resume his office's investigation into alleged crimes against humanity in Venezuela. The prosecutor set up an office in Caracas to facilitate assistance to Venezuelan authorities should they carry out their own investigations.

In September, a judge in Argentina summoned and issued arrest warrants against Nicolás Maduro, his Minister of Interior, Diosdado Cabello, and over a dozen other government officials and members of the security forces, to secure their testimony in a case filed against them under the principle of universal jurisdiction for alleged crimes against humanity.

In October, the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution proposed by several regional governments—Canada, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Paraguay, and Uruguay—renewing the FFM's mandate for a two-year period. The Council asked the FFM to investigate post-electoral repression including violence by "colectivos."

## Attacks on Human Rights Defenders

Repressive measures against the work of human rights defenders were reported throughout 2024, with over 592 attacks registered in the first half of 2024, a 92 percent increase compared to the same period in 2023.

Since the July 28 election, authorities have canceled the passports of human rights defenders, critics, political leaders, and independent journalists, preventing them from leaving the country. By August, the IACHR reported 36 cases. The total number is likely higher.

On August 15, the government-controlled National Assembly approved a bill granting the government extensive control over the operation and financing of nongovernmental organizations. The bill, which at time of writing Maduro had yet to sign into law, requires all organizations operating in the country to register and submit detailed documents to the executive branch. It includes vague "prohibitions," "offenses," and grounds to dissolve these groups, severely undermining freedom of association.

At time of writing, human rights defenders Rocío San Miguel, detained at Caracas Airport in February, and Javier Tarazona, arrested in July 2021, among others, remained in prison.

## Freedom of Expression

The authorities have stigmatized, harassed, and repressed the media, often closing critical outlets.

Espacio Público, a free-speech group, registered 507 violations to the right of freedom of expression occurring between January and August, including cases of intimidation (168), censorship (101) and judicial harassment (65). Most cases were registered in July, in the context of the elections. In the same period, Espacio Público reported that security forces detained at least 19 press workers, the national telecommunications authority closed 15 radio stations, and government authorities blocked at least 35 digital news and NGO websites, political content platforms, as well as platforms such as X, Wikipedia and the encrypted messaging app Signal.

## Humanitarian Emergency

Over 20 million Venezuelans, out of a population of 28.8 million, live in multidimensional poverty due to economic precarity and poor public services, having irreversibly lost their means of support and subsistence, and 14.2 million face severe humanitarian needs, according to the independent platform of civil society organizations HumVenezuela.

By March, the Venezuelan humanitarian organization Convite estimated that at least some essential medicines were unavailable at 28.4 percent of pharmaceutical dispensaries in the country, and several of those available were unaffordable to many.

Venezuelans face hunger, which affects 5.1 million people. The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food identified economic sanctions and the political instrumentalization of state food programs as factors hindering the realization of the right to food.

The ongoing humanitarian crisis forces many to adopt extreme survival strategies, such as stretching their budget, increasing their workload, skipping meals, exchanging goods for sex, or fleeing the country.

As of early December, the UN Humanitarian Response Plan remained underfunded, at less than 28 percent.

## Refugee Crisis

Roughly 8 million Venezuelans have left the country since 2014, of whom about 6.5 million relocated within Latin America and the Caribbean. After the election, 43 percent of Venezuelans surveyed were considering leaving the country, according to a local poll. Some people have already fled the country, including politicians, members of polling stations and voters.

A mix of factors causes Venezuelans to flee, including harsh economic conditions and persecution.

Movement restrictions in other countries such as visa requirements, some promoted by the US, as well as limited access to asylum and regularization, poor integration programs and discrimination and xenophobia in neighboring countries drive many into dangerous routes such us the Darién Gap, a dangerous jungle on the Colombia-Panama border, where they are exposed to abuse. Between January and October, over 198,000 Venezuelans crossed the Gap.

## Armed Groups

Armed groups—including the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Patriotic Forces of National Liberation (FPLN), and groups that emerged after the demobilization of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—operate mostly in border states, brutally enforcing regulations governing everyday activities.

"Colectivos," criminal groups, and armed groups reportedly intimidated opposition candidates and voters during the electoral campaign, particularly in border and mining areas.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

Abortion is criminalized except when the life of the pregnant person is at risk.

Access to sexual and reproductive health services for women and girls, including maternal care, family planning, and access to contraception remains inadequate.

The Center for Justice and Peace (Cepaz), an NGO, documented 127 femicides and 51 attempted femicides between January and September. The government has not released data on femicides since 2016.

## Indigenous Peoples' Rights

Indigenous peoples continue to "lack resources and access to adequate food," according to a UN expert, and are disproportionally impacted by "malnutrition, extreme poverty, as well as exposure to diseases and environmental degradation in part due to extractive activities within their territories." Illegal mining activities and violence due to the presence of armed and criminal groups in their territories have forcibly displaced many Indigenous communities.

Mining, along with agriculture, is one of the most significant drivers of deforestation in the Venezuelan Amazon. Security forces reportedly collaborate with illegal miners, including by providing mercury for gold mining, and targeting civilians with disproportionate use of force. Illegally mined Venezuelan gold is trafficked to Brazil, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic and then exported to other destinations.

# Vietnam

An intense internal power struggle displaced five members of Vietnam's politburo, with To Lam, former head of the notorious Ministry of Public Security, eventually securing the top position as secretary general of the Vietnamese Communist Party in July. Under To Lam, Vietnam's police had imprisoned scores of critics over the past decade, decimating Vietnam's budding civil society. This crackdown continued through 2024, targeting journalists, labor rights activists, and human rights defenders.

Vietnam suppresses citizens' basic rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, movement, and religion. Independent labor unions, human rights organizations, independent media, and political parties remain prohibited. The judiciary is not independent, and courts routinely deny defendants their due process rights. Police patrol the internet and arrest those they deem threatening to the Communist Party's monopoly on power.

A current member of the UN Human Rights Council for 2023-2025, Vietnam announced in February that it plans to seek another term. In the 4th cycle of the UN Universal Periodic Review, Vietnam rejected 49 recommendations on ensuring basic civil and political rights and reforming problematic laws.

## Political Prisoners and Detainees

Party-controlled courts sentenced online free speech advocates and civil society activists to long prison sentences on bogus charges such as "propaganda" or "infringing on the interests" of the state. In 2024, courts convicted at least 43 rights campaigners and sentenced them to long prison terms, including human rights defenders Nguyen Chi Tuyen, Nguyen Vu Binh and Phan Van Bach, and environmental activist Ngo Thi To Nhien.

Several UN experts urged the government of Vietnam to end convictions and deplorable detention conditions for human rights defenders.

At time of writing, police were holding at least 19 other dissidents in pretrial detention on politically motivated charges, including blogger Truong Huy San and human rights lawyer

Tran Dinh Trien. By the end of 2024, more than 170 rights activists and bloggers were serving prison sentences.

## Freedom of Association and Assembly

Vietnam does not allow independent unions. Leaders of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor (VGCL) are appointed by the government. Workers do not choose leaders or representatives who can bargain to set wages on their behalf. In so far as the VGCL bargains with management or at the state-wide level, it does so in the interests of the government and the Vietnamese Communist Party, not on behalf of workers and not in a representative capacity.

In April, police arrested Nguyen Van Binh and Vu Minh Tien, senior officials in Vietnam's Labor Ministry and in VGCL who had advocated for more meaningful labor reforms. In August, the United States declined Vietnam's request to be reclassified as a market economy, in part due to its failure to uphold labor rights.

## Right to Fair Trial

Authorities use a double standard in treating criminal suspects depending on whether the crime is considered political or non-political. In both political and non-political cases, police, prosecutors, and courts violate the fundamental legal principle behind the right to a fair trial: a presumption of innocence until proven guilty.

In cases involving what the authorities consider "politically motivated offenses," the government curbs defendants' rights by denying them access to legal counsel; preventing visits by family members while the accused are in pretrial detention; and blocking family members, activists, and friends from attending their trials. On June 1, 2024, police arrested independent journalist Truong Huy San. He was not allowed access to his lawyer for more than three months.

For non-political criminal cases in which authorities want to send a message to local communities, prosecutors and courts stage public trials to name and shame the defendants (and indirectly, their families), and "educate" the public. These so-called "mobile trials" (*xet xu luu dong*) use makeshift courts in public spaces such as a sports

stadium, local community spaces, schools and universities, or government facilities to hold trials of criminal suspects. In virtually all cases, the courts had already determined the defendants' guilt even before these public court spectacles began.

In January, a court in Dak Lak began a mobile trial against 100 defendants—some *in absentia*—accused of "terrorism" following an attack on government offices that caused nine deaths in June 2023. After three days, the court convicted and sentenced all 100 to terms ranging from nine months to life in prison, with each defendant's hearing lasting a maximum of 15 minutes.

## Freedom of Movement

The Vietnamese authorities systematically block rights activists, bloggers, dissidents, and their family members from domestic and international travel, including by stopping them at airports and border gates, and denying them passports or other documents that would allow them to leave or enter the country. Activists are routinely placed under house arrest during events deemed by the authorities as politically sensitive.

In March and April, local authorities in An Giang province blocked roads and placed Hoa Hao Buddhist disciples under house arrest to prevent them from commemorating the death anniversary of Hoa Hao Buddhist founder Huynh Phu So. In April, police at Moc Bai border gate in Tay Ninh prohibited Pham Thi Lan, the wife of political prisoner Nguyen Tuong Thuy, from leaving Vietnam for a personal trip to Cambodia, citing "security" as a reason. In June, the police at Tan Son Nhat airport prohibited activist Nguyen Thi Bich Hanh and her young sons to enter Vietnam to visit her sick mother. Hanh and sons were reportedly assaulted and detained, and were forced on an airplane for the US via Seoul two days later. In July, the authorities refused to issue a passport to former political prisoner Huynh Thuc Vy, citing "national security" as a reason. In September, the police at Noi Bai international airport in Hanoi prohibited blogger Bui Thanh Hieu (known as "Wind Trader") to enter Vietnam to visit his sick mother.

## Freedom of Religion and Belief

The government restricts religious practice through legislation, registration requirements, and surveillance. Religious groups must get approval from, and register with, the

government and operate under government-controlled management boards. Religious groups not recognized by the government are labeled "evil religions" (*ta dao*). In its Universal Periodic Review submission, Vietnam rejected a recommendation to "immediately end forced renunciation of faith against members of unregistered religious groups."

The police monitor, harass, and sometimes violently crack down on religious groups operating outside government-controlled institutions. Followers of independent religious groups are subject to harassment, intimidation, intrusive surveillance, public criticism, forced renunciation of faith, pretrial detention, interrogation, torture, and imprisonment. Phuoc Buu pagoda in Ba Ria-Vung Tau, which belongs to the Unified Buddhist Church (unrecognized by the Vietnamese government), has been subjected to repeated acts of vandalism for which no one has been held accountable.

In March 2024, the authorities of Dak Lak province prosecuted and sentenced Montagnard activist Y Krec Bya to 13 years in prison, and arrested Montagnard rights campaigner Y Po Mlo in August. Both men were charged with "undermining the national great unity" under article 116 of the penal code. Article 116 is frequently employed by authorities to punish ethnic minority activists for being affiliated with independent religious groups that the government disallows.

UN experts expressed alarm about the discriminatory misuse of counterterrorism laws against Montagnard Indigenous Peoples and Christian religious minorities in the country's Central Highlands.

# Yemen

Yemen remains one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. More than 18.2 million people need humanitarian assistance. Warring parties, especially the Houthis, have perpetrated new waves of violations, including arbitrarily detaining and forcibly disappearing dozens of staff of United Nations agencies and civil society organizations since May 31. The Houthis also began attacking ships in the Red Sea in November 2023 and firing rockets toward and into Israel, amounting to possible war crimes. Israel has also responded to the Houthis' attacks on Israel with two major attacks on Hodeidah port, a major entry point for humanitarian aid—attacks that also may amount to war crimes.

## Arbitrary Detention, Torture, and Enforced Disappearance

All parties to the conflict, including Houthi forces, the Yemeni government, and United Arab Emirated (UAE)-backed forces, such as the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the Joint Forces, have arbitrarily arrested, forcibly disappeared, tortured, and ill-treated detainees across Yemen. Hundreds of Yemenis have been detained at official and unofficial detention centers across the country.

Since May 31, the Houthis have arrested and forcibly disappeared dozens of people, including at least 17 staff of UN agencies and many employees of nongovernmental organizations, foreign embassies, and private companies operating in Houthi-controlled territories. The majority of those who were arrested still have not had any contact with their families, nor have they been given access to a lawyer.

Many other people have been arbitrarily detained by Houthis due to their activism or work, or on fabricated charges, and after unfair trials, including 32 men on dubious charges of sodomy.

UAE-backed forces, in particular the STC, continued to arbitrarily arrest and forcibly disappear individuals, including journalists and human rights defenders.

## Blocking and Impeding Humanitarian Access

Warring parties, particularly the Houthis, continued to obstruct humanitarian aid in 2024. The Houthis' obstructions of humanitarian operations and blackouts of information within their territories have exacerbated the cholera outbreak that spread across the country and claimed 258 deaths among 95,000 suspected cholera cases. Human Rights Watch has documented many cases of aid interference and obstruction by Houthi forces, including lengthy delays for approval of aid projects, blocking aid assessments to identify people's needs, and attempts to control aid monitoring and recipient lists to divert aid to those loyal to the authorities.

On July 17, the Houthi Supreme Council for Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (SCMCHA) sent a letter to international organizations operating in Yemen, requiring them to share their staff structure and instructing them to get the SCMCHA's pre-approval before hiring any local or international staff.

The Yemeni government has impeded the provision of much needed aid through the imposition of complex bureaucratic requirements on aid agencies that have impacted millions of civilians' ability to access aid.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

The Yemeni government, the STC, and the Houthis have continued to crack down on women's rights across the country. Houthis have increasingly restricted women's freedom of movement and imposed a strict policy requiring women to travel with a male relative (*mahram*) or to provide written approval from their male guardian allowing them to travel, a policy that had not existed before. In the south, even though there is no official guidance banning women from traveling alone between governorates, women have reported being stopped at Yemeni government and STC's checkpoints for several hours, and sometimes forced to turn around.

On May 26, STC forces seized the offices and the shelter of the Yemen Women's Union in Aden—which is one of the few safe spaces that women fleeing domestic and gender-based violence can rely on—putting the health and safety of women and children at a higher risk.

UN human rights experts have detailed the Houthis' "systematic violations of women's and girls' rights," including their rights to freedom of movement, freedom of expression, health, and work, as well as widespread discrimination. Amnesty International also reported that prison authorities across Yemen are arbitrarily detaining women who have completed their jail sentences. Women are only allowed to leave prison with a male guardian to accompany them upon release, otherwise they are kept in jail or released to women's shelters.

## Red Sea Attacks, Israeli Strikes on Hodeidah

On November 19, 2023, the Houthis seized the Galaxy Leader, a British-owned and Japanese-operated vehicles carrier, and arbitrarily detained its 25-person crew. The Houthis have attacked several commercial ships since November and stated that they would continue such attacks in solidarity with the Palestinians as long as Israel continued to commit crimes against them. In addition to targeting ships in the Red Sea, they have been targeting Israel's territories with drones and missiles. On July 19, a Houthi drone struck Tel Aviv and killed one civilian in an apartment building, which may amount to a war crime if done deliberately or indiscriminately. In response, Israel carried out airstrikes targeting Hodeidah port and a powerplant in northwest Yemen, first on July 20, killing at least six civilians and reportedly injuring at least 80 others, and second on September 29, killing at least four people and wounding 29 others. About 70 percent of Yemen's commercial imports and 80 percent of humanitarian assistance passes through Hodeidah port. The attacks appeared to cause disproportionate harm to civilians and civilian objects. Serious violations of the laws of war committed willfully are war crimes.

The United States and the United Kingdom, along with a coalition of countries, have responded to the Red Sea attacks as well with strikes on Houthi-controlled territories of Yemen, some of which have reportedly caused civilian casualties.

## Harms Against Children in Armed Conflict

9.8 million children in Yemen are in need of humanitarian assistance. Parties to the conflict have attacked hospitals and schools, causing disruptions to health services and children's education. Warring parties' attacks on water and food infrastructure, and their weaponization of water, have had particularly harmful impacts on children. Many children

have had to drop out of school to make time to travel and queue to bring water to their families.

The Houthis and the Saudi- and UAE-led coalition have committed serious violations against children throughout the war. Indiscriminate attacks have destroyed schools and hospitals and killed or injured thousands of children. Warring parties, including the Houthis and government forces, have recruited and deployed over 4,000 children in combat, according to the UN. The Houthis have also recruited children into their armed forces under the pretext of defending Palestine.

## Landmines and Unexploded Ordinance

Landmines and explosive remnants of war continue to be a major cause of civilian casualties and continue to cause displacement. In the village of al-Shaqb, on the frontlines of the conflict in Taizz, many civilians have been injured and killed from the Houthis' placement of landmines, and nearly the entire village has suffered from an inability to access their agricultural land—in many cases their sources of livelihood—due to the presence of uncleared landmines in their village. Between August 1, 2023 and July 31, 2024, 79 mine incidents killed 49 people and injured 66 others, including children, according to the United Nations Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA).

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Yemen's penal code prohibits same-sex relations. Article 264 punishes anal sex with 100 lashes and one year in prison if participants are not married. If married, the same article prescribes death by stoning. Article 268 punishes sex between women with up to three years in prison. In January, a Houthis' court sentenced 32 men, nine of them to death in unfair mass trial based on dubious charges of sodomy, and the others to different sentences such as crucifixion and stoning, in addition to public flogging and imprisonment up to 10 years.

## Abuses Against Migrants and Asylum Seekers

Yemen continues to be a transit country for migrants coming mostly from the Horn of Africa, trying to access Gulf states, in particular Saudi Arabia. The International Organization for Migrants (IOM) estimated that 308,000 migrants would need

humanitarian assistance, protection, and other services in 2024. In August 2023, Human Rights Watch reported on the mass killing of Ethiopian migrants by Saudi Border Guard forces at the Yemen-Saudi border. The report found that Saudi border guards killed hundreds of Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers who tried to cross the Yemen-Saudi border between March 2022 and June 2023. If committed as part of a Saudi government policy to murder migrants, these killings, which appear to have continued, would be a crime against humanity.

Since the armed conflict began in Yemen in 2014, both the government and the Houthi armed group have detained migrants in poor conditions and exposed them to abuse.

## Lack of Accountability

There has been virtually no accountability for violations committed by parties to the conflict. Since the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) narrowly voted to end the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen in October 2021, there has been no independent international mechanism to monitor the human rights situation in Yemen and lay the foundation for accountability for abuses. The Item 10 Resolution on Yemen at the HRC has failed to include any monitoring and reporting mandate, making it a very weak response to the ongoing violations in the country.

Mwatana for Human Rights and Yale Law School's Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic found that the warring parties have failed to effectively provide reparations. Thus far, negotiations between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia have not included discussions of accountability.

# Zambia

Human rights concerns in Zambia persisted throughout 2024 as the administration of President Hakainde Hichilema increasingly exhibited tendencies toward authoritarianism. Respect for civil and political rights did not improve, as the authorities harassed and intimidated journalists, youth activists, and political opposition leaders for expressing dissent or criticism of the government.

Since October 2023, the country has been grappling with a severe cholera outbreak, which comes after years of government policies neglecting health care, sanitation, and access to safe drinking water.

## Freedoms of Association, Assembly, and Expression

There has been a marked increase in intolerance toward dissent and political opposition. Despite President Hichilema's promise to uphold press freedom, journalists covering protests and political events have been subjected to arbitrary detention, harassment, and violence by police. The authorities have increasingly weaponized provisions of the Public Order Act of 1955 to restrict and disrupt opposition activities. This legislation allows authorities to prohibit gatherings not sanctioned by the police.

In April, police officers assaulted and arrested two journalists, Rodgers Mwiimba of Millennium TV, Innocent Phiri of KBN TV as they covered a planned rally by the opposition party United Kwacha Alliance. The police detained the journalists and allegedly compelled them to delete their footage before they were released without charges. The Zambian Police Service explained in a statement that the journalists were arrested for filming and conducting interviews with two politicians at a rally that was not "lawfully sanctioned."

On May 17, a Lusaka magistrate court convicted and sentenced Raphael Nakacinda, secretary general of the main opposition party, Patriotic Front, to 18 months in prison with hard labor for "defaming the president."

This is despite the repeal in 2022 of the offense of criminal defamation of the president, provided for under section 69 of the Zambian Penal Code. This provision has

historically been utilized to target government critics and journalists. Upon taking office in 2021, President Hichilema had said that the provision “inhibits the growth of democracy and good governance, impedes human rights and basic freedom.”

Also in May, Andrew Chewe Mukosa, a Catholic priest, was questioned by police about to his Good Friday sermon that was perceived as critical of the government.

In August, police arrested and detained for two days, journalist Thomas Allan Zgambo for a post on the Facebook page of an online news outlet, Zambian Whistleblower, in which he called for government transparency regarding a property allegedly linked to President Hichilema. Authorities charged Zgambo with publishing seditious material, a colonial-era offense that carries a minimum sentence of seven years’ imprisonment. In October, police arrested Zgambo and detained him for 16 days, following the publication of an article critical of top government officials.

## Increased Authoritarianism

Ahead of Zambia’s national elections scheduled for 2026, the authorities increasingly exhibited hostility toward dissent and the political opposition.

The media reported that the authorities have monitored and restricted d the movements of former president Edgar Lungu. The former president reportedly said that he has been threatened with arrest for "engaging in activities that disrupt public order and safety." On May 18, police disrupted a meeting between Lungu and Bishop Clement Mulenga of Kabwe Diocese, which they alleged was illegal.

In September, the president suspended three Constitutional Court judges, 48 hours before the judges were to hear a significant case to determine former president Lungu’s eligibility to contest the 2026 election. The suspended judges had previously dismissed President Hichilema’s 2016 challenge of Lungu’s electoral victory. The Law Association of Zambia said in a statement that it did “not support the suspension or disciplining of any judicial officer for doing what they are constitutionally mandated to do.” It said the suspensions affected the constitutionally guaranteed independence of the judiciary. Hakainde dismissed the three judges in October.

In his annual address to parliament on September 13, President Hichilema alarmingly remarked that if the country's constitution were not amended to rectify perceived "lacunae, omissions, or oversights" the country might not conduct general elections for "eight or nine years."

## Cholera Outbreak

Since October 2023, Zambia has been experiencing an outbreak of cholera, the most severe to occur in the country in 20 years. From the start of the year to August 4, UNICEF had recorded 23,378 cumulative cases, including 740 related to the outbreak. The cholera crisis is exacerbated by a combination of factors, including inadequate access to healthcare, clean water, and extreme weather events. According to WaterAid, 6.4 million Zambians – nearly one-third of the population – lack access to clean water and 12.8 million people have no access to adequate sanitation, which puts them at increased risk of contracting dangerous waterborne diseases such as cholera and typhoid.

Despite government efforts to improve access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, including the rehabilitation of water treatment plants and building of new boreholes, UNICEF found a decline in the 2024 public allocation to water, sanitation and hygiene in the national budget.

## Lead Contamination in Kabwe

Three decades after the closure of a lead and zinc mine in Kabwe, communities in and around the city suffer lead poisoning from severe lead contamination. An estimated 200,000 people are exposed to lead, including children who often suffer irreversible cognitive harm. Ongoing lead mining and processing activities, and the disposal of large mountains of lead waste in publicly accessible areas, exacerbate existing health concerns.

In April, President Hichilema created an interministerial committee, composed of representatives of government and civil society, to address lead contamination in Kabwe. The committee had yet to start functioning at time of writing.

With a World Bank loan, Zambia Mining and Environmental Remediation and Improvement Project sought to reduce lead exposure in Kabwe. It concluded its work in June. The project

tested and treated some children and cleaned up a small number of homes and a highly polluted canal. The project, however, failed to provide durable solutions as it did not address the source of the contamination, the former mine itself.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Article 155 of the penal code punishes consensual same-sex relationships with up to 14 years' imprisonment. On June 4, two petitioners filed a petition at the Constitutional Court, urging the decriminalization of homosexuality.

# Zimbabwe

In 2024, Zimbabwean authorities acted to undermine democratic processes, repressed civil society and restricted political pluralism. They continued to weaponize the criminal justice system against perceived critics and the political opposition. Impunity for the ruling party ZANU-PF violence, intimidation, harassment, and repression against opposition members and civil society activists restricted civic and political space.

The authorities failed to uphold the government's domestic and international human rights obligations to respect peaceful activism.

## Intensified Crackdown on Government Critics

Ahead of the August 17 Southern African Development Community (SADC) heads of state summit in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, the authorities intensified the crackdown on opposition members and civil society activists. Security forces arrested more than 160 people, including a religious leader, elected parliament and council officials, political activists, union leaders, students, and journalists.

On June 16, police arrested over 70 people at a private event to commemorate the Day of the African Child at the home of Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) party leader, Jameson Timba. The police charged the detainees, including Timba with "participating in a gathering with the intent to promote violence, breaches of peace or bigotry," as well as disorderly conduct. The detainees' lawyers said the police had beaten their clients during arrest, and further ill-treated, tortured, and denied them medical care and other rights in detention. The detainees included a woman with a year-old child. Tambudzai Makororo, whose leg was fractured during the arrest, was not allowed surgery until 23 days later. Makororo's son died while she was in custody, but the authorities denied her request to attend the funeral.

On June 24, police arrested 44 members of the Zimbabwe National Students Union, including its president, Emmanuel Sitima, and required them to pay fines for "disorderly conduct" before releasing them.

At a ZANU-PF meeting on June 27, President Emerson Mnangagwa said he was "aware of certain rogue elements within the nation who are bent on peddling falsehoods and instigating acts of civil disorder, especially before, during, and after regional and world stage events." He said security agencies were on high alert to decisively deal with the so-called rogue elements.

Police on June 29 arrested in a private home, five members of a movement called National Democratic Working Group, for allegedly holding an "unsanctioned gathering" and "agitating for criminal acts in the country." A spokesperson for the five said they were meeting to organize food disbursements to needy people in their area. On June 30, authorities disrupted a memorial event for an opposition supporter killed in 2022 and arrested several participants.

On July 31, suspected state agents pulled four activists off a plane before takeoff at the Harare International airport, and forcibly disappeared them for nearly eight hours. Lawyers said the agents subjected all four to torture and other ill-treatment, and that the agents threatened to rape and kill the wife of Robson Chere, one of the detained activists. The authorities charged the four activists with "disorderly conduct" for allegedly participating in a protest on June 27. Three of the four activists were granted bail after 35 days in detention.

On August 2, Jacob Ngarivhume, leader of the opposition party Transform Zimbabwe, was arrested and charged for allegedly participating in a July 16 event where police arrested over 70 CCC members. Ngarivhume was granted bail on October 23, after 82 days in detention.

The authorities have continued to deny those arrested their rights to bail and a fair trial. A leading opposition politician, Job Sikhala, was freed in January after being jailed for 595 days on charges of inciting public violence.

On August 20, the ZANU-PF spokesperson said activists had been arrested as a "preventative measure" and could be released following the "success" of the SADC Summit. However, authorities at time of writing are yet to unconditionally release detained activists and opposition members since the SADC Summit ended in August.

## Repression of Civil Society Organizations

The authorities have continued to restrict civic space and the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. The government has sought to enact, or has enacted, legislation that would substantially compound existing restrictions on human rights. The Private Voluntary Organizations Amendment Bill 2021 passed by parliament in February 2023 failed to get presidential assent and lapsed in August 2023. A new bill was passed by the senate on October 17 and if signed into law by the president, it will directly affect the structure and management of civil society organizations. It will also allow the authorities to cancel the registration of organizations deemed to have "political affiliation" with little to no recourse to judicial review. Actions considered in violation of certain provisions of the law could be prosecuted, with penalties ranging from heavy fines to imprisonment.

## Impunity for Abuses

The authorities' failure to investigate and prosecute abuses primarily committed by state security agents has entrenched the culture of impunity. On June 29, 2024, media quoted the National Army commander, Lt. Gen. Anselem Sanyatwe, who has been placed under sanctions by the United States government, as saying that in future elections, people would be marched to polling stations to vote for the ruling ZANU-PF party, "whether you like it or not."

For decades, Zimbabwe's military and other state security forces have interfered in the nation's political and electoral affairs in violation of citizens' civil and political rights. The government and military hierarchies have repeatedly ignored the provisions of Zimbabwe's Constitution, which prohibits members of security agencies from acting in a partisan manner, further the interests of any political party, or cause or violate anyone's fundamental rights or freedoms.

In March, the US government renewed sanctions against 11 individuals, including President Mnangagwa, and three entities for their involvement in corruption or serious human rights abuses. The announcement noted that Zimbabwe's security forces had engaged in the violent repression of political activists and civil society organizations.

## Proposed Abolition of the Death Penalty

In March, Zimbabwe's cabinet approved a bill that, if passed by parliament, would abolish the death penalty. Although Zimbabwe carried out its last executions in 2005, courts have continued to impose the death sentence. There are currently 63 prisoners on death row. The Constitution protects the right to life, but empowers courts in limited circumstances to impose the death penalty for people convicted of the charge of aggravated murder. The proposed law would prohibit the imposition of death penalty in the country and would require the Supreme Court to substitute the death penalty on appeal, for some other appropriate penalty.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Section 73 of the 2006 Criminal Code of Zimbabwe criminalizes same-sex sexual activities between men. Sentences include a maximum penalty of one year and a fine. Article 78(3) of the Constitution prohibits same-sex marriage. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people frequently face threats, harassment and violence. In August 2024, two men were arrested and charged under sodomy laws while they were seeking justice for blackmail and extortion.

## Children's Rights

Child labor remained a serious problem, with children participating in hazardous work in tobacco farming and other sectors. School fees continued to pose a barrier to education. Pregnant girls and adolescent mothers continued to face challenges continuing formal education.

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

# WORLD REPORT 2025

This 35th annual World Report summarizes human rights conditions in over 100 countries and territories worldwide in 2024.

It reflects extensive investigative work that Human Rights Watch staff confucted during the year, often in close partnership with domestic human rights activists.

(cover) A Palestinian woman looks out from a damaged building at al-Bureij refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip on June 26, 2024.

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