

Preface

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
March 6, 2007

Across the globe, men and women are pushing for greater personal and political freedom and for the adoption of democratic institutions. They are striving to secure what President Bush calls "the non-negotiable demands of human dignity."

Despite personal risk and against great odds, courageous individuals and nongovernmental groups expose human rights abuses. They seek to protect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, workers, and women, and to stop the trafficking in human beings. They work to build vibrant civil societies, ensure free and fair elections, and establish accountable, law-based democracies.

These impatient patriots are redefining the limitations of what was previously thought to be possible. Indeed, in the span of a few generations freedom has spread across the developing world, communist dictatorships have collapsed, and new democracies have risen. The rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are protected more fully and by more countries than ever before.

This noble work continues - but it is not yet complete and it faces determined opponents. Not surprisingly, those who feel threatened by democratic change resist those who advocate and act for reform. Over the past year, we have seen attempts to harass and intimidate human rights defenders and civil society organizations and to restrict or shut down their activities. Unjust laws have been wielded as political weapons against those with independent views. There also have been attempts to silence dissenting voices by extralegal means.

Whenever non-governmental organizations and other human rights defenders are under siege, freedom and democracy are undermined. The world's democracies must defend the defenders. That is one of the primary missions of our diplomacy today, and we hope that the Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2006 will help to further this effort. With these thoughts, I hereby submit these reports to the United States Congress.

Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State

Introduction

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These reports describe the performance of governments in putting into practice their international commitments on human rights. These fundamental rights, reflected in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, constitute what President Bush calls the "non-negotiable demands of human dignity." As Secretary Rice has said, the full promise of the UN Universal Declaration cannot be realized overnight, but it is urgent work that cannot be delayed.

The Universal Declaration calls upon "every individual and every organ of society ... to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance..."

The United States takes its human rights commitments seriously. We recognize that we are writing this report at a time when our own record, and actions we have taken to respond to the terrorist attacks against us, have been questioned. The United States will continue to respond forthrightly to the good faith concerns of others, including by means of the reports we submit periodically in accordance with our obligations under various human rights treaties to which we are a party. We are also committed to continual improvement. US laws, policies, and practices governing the detention, treatment, and trial of terrorist suspects have evolved considerably over the last five years. Our democratic system of government is not infallible, but it is accountable--our robust civil society, our vibrant free media, our independent branches of government, and a well established rule of law work as correctives.

The congressionally mandated country reports on human rights practices that follow are an essential element of the United States' effort to promote respect for human rights worldwide. For three decades, these annual reports have been used widely here and abroad as a reference document for assessing the progress made and the challenges that remain.

They also have served as a foundation for cooperative action among governments, organizations, and individuals seeking to end abuses and strengthen the capacity of countries to protect the Fundamental rights of all.

The reports review each country's performance in 2006. Each report speaks for itself. Yet, broad patterns are discernible and

are described below, supported by country-specific examples. The examples we cite are illustrative, not exhaustive.

Hopeful Trends, Yet Sobering Realities

As a review of these reports shows, across the globe in 2006, men and women continued to press for their rights to be respected and their governments to be responsive, for their voices to be heard and their votes to count, for just laws and justice for all. There also was a growing recognition that democracy is the form of government that can best meet the demands of citizens for dignity, liberty, and equality. These are hopeful trends indeed, yet the reports also reflect sobering realities:

First, the advances made in human rights and democracy were hard won and challenging to sustain. While some countries made significant progress, some lagged and others regressed.

As the range of examples below demonstrates, the performance of countries varied greatly, depending on factors such as the degree of governmental commitment, institutional capacity, the extent of corruption, and the strength of civil society.

In January 2006 **Liberia's** democratically elected Unity Party government, led by Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the first female head of state in Africa, replaced the National Transitional Government of Liberia, which had served as the interim government since the end of a ruinous 14-year civil war in 2003. The government took significant steps to correct past human rights deficiencies, including working with international partners to rehabilitate the country's justice sector and establishing a public defender's office in the capital. The president dismissed or suspended a number of corrupt government officials. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 2005 to investigate human rights violations and war crimes committed during the civil war, began taking statements from witnesses. Despite this progress, Liberia continued to face serious human rights challenges, including a still weak judiciary, official corruption and impunity, gender-based violence, and extreme poverty that led to child labor.

Substantial reductions in killings by the armed forces and the police in politically sensitive areas of **Indonesia** continued during the year.

Fifty-four generally free and fair elections were held at the provincial, regency, district, and municipal levels, most notably in December in Aceh, where a former rebel field commander won the governorship. Although inter-communal religious violence generally abated, it nonetheless persisted in some areas. The

government and the courts were unable to confront past human rights abuses and atrocities both in Indonesia and in East Timor.

Morocco's human rights record showed notable progress, although problems remained. The government began to address past human rights abuses by providing compensation through the Consultative Council on Human Rights for specific cases of arrest, disappearance, and abuse during the period between 1956 and 1999. In March the government enacted an antitorture law, although reports of torture by various branches of the security forces persisted. There was extensive and largely open debate in public and in the press, despite continuing restrictions on freedom of the press and speech. During the year the government punished some journalists who violated limitations on free speech, and many journalists practiced self-censorship. Trafficking in persons, particularly for sexual exploitation, and child labor remained issues of concern; however, both the government and civil society were increasingly active in addressing them.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo held its first democratic presidential and legislative elections in more than 45 years, putting an end to a three-year post-civil war transitional period. A new constitution went into force. Yet, the human rights record remained poor. In addition to simmering conflict in the east, where government control remained weak and armed groups continued to commit serious abuses, government security forces across the country also committed serious abuses with impunity.

In **Haiti**, citizens demonstrated their commitment to democracy by going to the polls three times in 2006. More than 3.5 million citizens registered to vote, and an impressive turnout estimated at more than 70 percent of registered voters participated in the first round of presidential and parliamentary elections in February. After a relatively stable and violence-free election process, voters selected President Rene Preval and filled 129 parliamentary seats. In December, Haiti held its first municipal elections in more than a decade. Yet much remains to be done to restore fully the rule of law, including an overhaul of Haiti's dysfunctional judicial system and the continued retraining and vetting of the Haitian National Police.

In **Ukraine**, notable post-Orange Revolution progress in human rights performance continued to be made. The March 2006 parliamentary elections were the freest in 15 years of independence. The country continued to make improvements in press freedom, freedom of association, and the development of civil society. Despite these gains, a number of serious problems remained, including corruption in all branches of government.

Although **Kyrgyzstan's** human rights record had improved considerably following the change to democratically elected leadership in 2005, during 2006 a week of mass yet peaceful protests culminated in the hasty adoption of an amended constitution that offered the possibility for genuine checks and balances. At the end of December, however, parliament passed another constitution negating many key checks and balances. The government also harassed foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Despite President Musharraf's stated commitment to democratic transition and "enlightened moderation," Pakistan's human rights record continued to be poor. Restrictions remained on freedom of movement, expression, association, and religion. Disappearances of provincial activists and political opponents continued, especially in provinces experiencing internal turmoil and insurgencies. The security forces continued to commit extrajudicial killings. Arbitrary arrest and torture remained common.

Corruption was pervasive throughout the government and police forces. On a positive note, in December the National Assembly passed and President Musharraf signed the Women's Protection Bill - marking the first time in three decades that a Pakistan government successfully rolled back laws detrimental to women's rights. The law amends the 1979 rape and adultery provision of the Hudood Ordinance by transferring the offense of rape from Pakistan Sharia law to the Pakistan Penal Code. The law also eliminates the requirement for rape victims to present four male witnesses to press charges.

Though **Egypt** held a first-ever, multi-party presidential election in 2005, in 2006 public calls for greater democratization and accountability sometimes met with strong government reaction. The continued imprisonment of former presidential candidate Ayman Nour raised serious concerns about the path of political reform and democracy in the country. Continuing a trend begun in 2005, the government arrested and detained hundreds of activists affiliated with the banned-but-tolerated Muslim Brotherhood, generally for periods lasting several weeks. Two senior judges were brought in for questioning in February for publicly calling for an independent judiciary. Egyptian police arrested and detained over 500 activists for participating in demonstrations in support of judicial independence. In addition, severe cases of torture by authorities were documented. The government also arrested, detained, and abused several Internet bloggers.

In **Kazakhstan**, the government restricted the functioning of the political opposition by enforcing onerous registration requirements and hindering or denying political party registration. The merging of progovernment parties consolidated

the firm leadership of President Nazarbayev's Otan Party and left less political space to express alternative views and advocate for reform. The government harassed the political opposition via politically motivated charges and restrictions on freedom of assembly, passed laws restricting press freedom, and harassed NGOs.

Russia experienced continuing centralization of power in the executive branch, including amendments to election laws and new legislation for political parties that grants the government broad powers to regulate, investigate, limit, and even close down parties. Taken together with a compliant State Duma, corruption and selectivity in law enforcement, political pressure on the judiciary, and restrictions on the NGOs and the media, these trends resulted in the further erosion of government accountability. In Chechnya and other areas of the North Caucasus, serious human rights violations continued, including unlawful killings and abuses of civilians by both federal and Chechen Republic security forces. Rebel fighters committed terrorist bombings and politically motivated disappearances in the region. In a growing number of cases, the European Court of Human Rights held Russia responsible for these abuses.

In **Venezuela**, the Chavez government continued to consolidate power in the executive branch. The government continued to harass the opposition and NGOs and to weaken judicial independence. International observers judged generally free and fair the December presidential elections, in which President Chavez won re-election with 63 percent of the vote. In his inaugural address, President Chavez asked the National Assembly, in which his parties control 100 percent of the seats, to grant him power to rule by executive decree.

In **Fiji** and **Thailand**, militaries overthrew democratically elected governments.

A second sobering reality is that insecurity due to internal and/or cross-border conflict can threaten or thwart advancements in human rights and democratic government.

Despite the **Iraqi** government's continuing commitment to foster national reconciliation and reconstruction, keep to an electoral course, and establish the rule of law, both deepening sectarian violence and acts of terrorism seriously undercut human rights and democratic progress during 2006. Although the Iraqi constitution and law provide a strong framework for the protection of human rights, armed groups attacked human rights from two different directions: those proclaiming their hostility

to the government--Al-Qa'ida terrorists, irreconcilable remnants of the Ba'athist regime, and insurgents waging guerrilla warfare; and members of Shi'a militias and individual ministries' security forces--nominally allied with the government--who committed torture and other abuses.

Although **Afghanistan** made important human rights progress since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, its human rights record remained poor. This was mainly due to weak central institutions and a deadly insurgency: the Taliban, Al-Qa'ida, and other extremist groups stepped up attacks against government officials, security forces, NGOs and other aid personnel, and unarmed civilians; and the number of suicide bombings rose dramatically during the year, as did attacks on schools and teachers. There were continued reports of cases of arbitrary arrests and detention, extrajudicial killings, torture, and poor prison conditions. In December President Karzai launched a Transitional Justice Action Plan designed to address past violations of human rights and improve the institutional capacity of the justice system.

Lebanon's significant steps toward reform following the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian troops after nearly three decades of occupation have been hampered since the July-August 2006 conflict between Hizballah and Israel. Before the conflict, the Lebanese government had started to remove many of the obstacles that barred political associations and parties. After Hizballah entered Israel from Lebanese territory and kidnapped and killed several Israeli soldiers, Israeli military forces responded by entering Lebanese territory. The conflict ended with an UN-sponsored cessation of hostilities. Despite the cessation of hostilities and the deployment of the Lebanon Armed Forces and UN Interim Forces in the south, Lebanese militias and Hizballah retained significant influence over parts of the country.

In **East Timor**, a series of deadly clashes between the national defense force and a variety of dissident military, police, and civilian forces led to widespread mob and gang violence in the capital. At the request of the government, forces from Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Portugal assumed responsibility for security in the capital. On August 25, the UN Integrated Mission for East Timor took over policing responsibilities. This internal conflict resulted in the displacement of approximately 150,000 people, more than 15 percent of the country's population.

Third, despite gains for human rights and democratic principles in every region of the world, much of humanity still lives in fear yet dreams of freedom.

Countries in which power remained concentrated in the hands of unaccountable rulers--whether totalitarian or authoritarian--continued to be the world's most systematic human rights violators.

In 2006 **North Korea** remained one of the world's most isolated and repressive regimes. The regime controls almost all aspects of citizens' lives, denying freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association, and restricts freedom of movement and worker rights. The constitution provides for "freedom of religious belief," but genuine religious freedom does not exist. An estimated 150,000 to 200,000 people, including political prisoners, were held in detention camps, and many prisoners died from torture, starvation, disease, and exposure.

The military government in **Burma** extensively used executions, rape, torture, arbitrary detention, and forced relocation of entire villages, particularly of ethnic minorities, to maintain its grip on power.

Prisoners and detainees were subjected to abuse and held in harsh, life-threatening conditions. Surveillance, harassment, and imprisonment of political activists continued; Nobel Laureate and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi remained incommunicado under house arrest, and over 1,100 political prisoners languished in prison. The use of forced labor, trafficking in persons, conscription of child soldiers, and religious discrimination remained widespread. The government reconvened the sham National Convention, handpicking delegates and prohibiting free debate. Touted as part of a "democracy road map", the convention was designed to nullify the results of the 1990 election and adopt a new, regime-friendly constitution. The regime's cruel and destructive misrule also resulted in refugee outflows, the spread of infectious diseases, and the trafficking of drugs and human beings into neighboring countries.

The **Iranian** government flagrantly violated freedom of speech and assembly, intensifying its crackdown against dissidents, journalists, and reformers - a crackdown characterized by arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture, disappearances, the use of excessive force, and the widespread denial of fair public trials. The government continued to detain and abuse Baha'is and other religious minorities and hosted a widely condemned conference denying the existence of the Holocaust. In the lead-up to the December 15 Assembly of Experts elections in Iran, more than two-thirds of those who had applied to run - including all

female candidates - were disqualified, leaving many seats uncontested. Hundreds of candidates in nationwide municipal elections also were disqualified. The government continued to flout domestic and international calls for responsible government in 2006 by supporting terrorist movements in Syria and Lebanon as well as calling for the destruction of a UN member state.

In **Zimbabwe**, the Mugabe government continued across-the-board violations of human rights. Official corruption and impunity were widespread. The 2002 Official Secrets Act and Public Order and Security Act remained in effect, severely restricting civil liberties. In the 2006 parliamentary by-elections and rural district council elections, the government's manipulation of the electoral process disenfranchised voters and skewed elections in favor of ruling party candidates. The ruling party's dominance permitted constitutional changes without wide consultation. Security forces harassed, beat, and arbitrarily arrested critics and opposition supporters. Disruptions at farms and seizures of property continued and were sometimes violent. The campaign of forced evictions, which left 700,000 people homeless during Operation Restore Order in 2005, continued on a lesser scale. The government interfered with humanitarian organizations' efforts to provide assistance. In December Mugabe and his loyalists proposed extending his term for two years by deferring presidential elections to 2010.

In **Cuba**, the government, temporarily headed by Raul Castro due to Fidel Castro's illness, continued to violate virtually all the rights of its citizens, including the fundamental right to change their government peacefully or criticize the revolution or its leaders. In 2006 the government increased its harassment of dissidents and other citizens viewed as threats to the government, often through mob actions called "acts of repudiation" involving verbal abuse and physical attacks. Beatings and abuse of detainees and prisoners also were carried out with impunity. Although token releases of prisoners occurred during the year, at least 283 political prisoners and detainees were held at year's end, including 59 of 75 prodemocracy and human rights activists imprisoned in a March 2003 crackdown.

The **Chinese** government's human rights record deteriorated in some areas in 2006. There was an increased number of high-profile cases involving the monitoring, harassment, detention, and imprisonment of political and religious activists, journalists, and writers as well as defense lawyers seeking to exercise their rights under the law. Some of their family members also were harassed and detained. Large numbers of mass demonstrations and protests calling for redress of grievances continued and in some cases were violently suppressed. New government controls were imposed on: NGOs; the media, including the Internet; and courts

and judges. Repression of unregistered religious groups and of minority groups, in particular Uighurs and Tibetans, remained a serious concern.

In **Belarus**, the Lukashenko government continued and intensified its repressive policies. The March presidential election was severely flawed. Up to 1,000 people were arrested in an ensuing crackdown on public protests against the results and many were sentenced to short jail terms. More activists and opposition members, including Aleksander Kozulin, who ran against Lukashenko in the presidential race, were sentenced to jail terms ranging from 2 to 5 ½ years.

The **Eritrean** government continued to be one of the most repressive in Sub-Saharan Africa, and its human rights record worsened in 2006. Government security forces committed extrajudicial killings; there were credible reports that security forces shot on sight individuals trying to cross the border into Ethiopia. The government escalated its campaign of arresting national service evaders as well as their relatives, and there also were credible reports indicating that some of those arrested were tortured. As it did in 2005, the government ordered several international humanitarian NGOs to leave the country, despite a severe drought in the Horn of Africa. There were continued severe restrictions on religious freedom.

The fourth sobering reality is that as the worldwide push for greater personal and political freedom grows stronger, it is being met with increasing resistance from those who feel threatened by political and societal change.

Human rights defenders and nongovernmental organizations are essential to a nation's success. In today's world, the problems confronting states are too complex even for the most powerful to tackle alone. The contributions of civil society and the free flow of ideas and information are crucial in addressing a host of domestic and international challenges. Restricting the political space of NGOs and public debate only limits a society's own growth.

In every region of the globe in 2006, there were governments that responded to the growing demands for personal and political freedom not by accepting their obligations to their people but by oppressing those who advocated for human rights and who exposed abuses, such as nongovernmental organizations and independent media, including the Internet. A disturbing number of countries passed or selectively applied laws and regulations against NGOs and journalists. NGOs and journalists also were subjected to extralegal measures, often by unknown assailants. For example:

In **Russia** in 2006, a new NGO law entered into force in April imposing more stringent registration requirements for NGOs, strict monitoring of organizations, extensive and onerous reporting requirements on programming and activities, and empowering the Federal Registration Service to deny registration or to shut down an organization based on vague and subjective criteria. Freedom of expression and media independence declined due to government pressure and restrictions. In October unknown persons murdered human rights defender Anna Politkovskaya, a prominent journalist known for her critical writing on human rights abuses in Chechnya. The government used its controlling ownership of all national television and radio stations, as well as of the majority of influential regional ones, to restrict access to information deemed sensitive.

In **Belarus**, onerous tax inspections and NGO registration requirements made it difficult for civil society organizations to operate, and attacks against members of the independent media continued. In November prodemocracy activist Dmitriy Dashkevich was sentenced to 18 months in prison for operating an unregistered NGO.

The government of **Kazakhstan** registered the opposition True Ak Zhol party after one of its co-chairmen, Sarsenbaiuly, was killed and restrictively interpreted Article 5 of the constitution to suspend foreign-funded, nonpartisan political party training activities, asserting that providing information is tantamount to financing political parties. In July President Nazarbayev signed into law restrictive media amendments deemed a step backward by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Freedom of Media Representative. The government continued to use restrictive libel laws to fine, convict, and suspend media outlets, journalists, and critics. In April a member of a suspended media outlet was brutally beaten.

Freedom of expression, association and assembly are tightly restricted in **Turkmenistan**, and the government sought to control all NGO activity. Foreign-origin satellite television is accessible throughout the country, but the government controlled all domestic media, and local journalists were prohibited from all contact with foreigners unless specifically permitted. Very limited Internet access was provided through government-owned Turkmen Telecom; no new accounts were allowed in the capital since September 2002. In August the government arrested journalists Ogulspapar Myradova, Annakurban Amanklichev, and Sapardurdy Hajiyev and sentenced them to six to seven years of imprisonment for weapons possession in a closed, summary trial. In September Myradova, a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty correspondent, died

in prison under suspicious circumstances. NGOs have reported that she and her two colleagues were tortured during detention in the summer to extract confessions of weapons possession. On December 21, President Saparmurat Niyazov died.

The Government of **Uzbekistan** sought to control most NGO activity and closed down over 200 civil society organizations, including international NGOs operating in the country, citing alleged violations of the law. Independent journalists and human rights activists continued to be persecuted.

The **Syrian** government strictly controlled the dissemination of information and prohibited criticism of the government and discussion of sectarian issues, including religious and minority rights. There were detentions and beatings for individual expressions of opinion that violated these restrictions, for example the February arrest of journalist Adel Mahfouz after he called for interfaith dialogue following the controversy surrounding the depiction of the Prophet Muhammed in cartoons. The government relied on its press and publication laws, the penalcode, and the Emergency Law to censor access to the Internet, and it restricted electronic media. Harassment of domestic human rights activists also occurred, including regular close surveillance and the imposition of travel bans when they sought to attend workshops and conferences outside the country.

Press freedom was at an all-time low in **Iran**, as the government closed independent newspapers Shargh and Iran, blocked access to Internet news sites--including the New York Times and BBC Farsi--and jailed journalists and bloggers. The authorities used bans against leaving the country as a weapon against journalists.

In **Burundi**, there was an increase in the arrest, detention, and intimidation of journalists and human rights activists by the government; among many other individuals, police arrested and detained for several months the president of the country's leading anticorruption NGO. A governor of one province reportedly called the country's leading human rights NGO, League Iteka, an enemy of peace, and in November a government official announced that 32 registered international NGOs in the country could face expulsion for failure to submit mandatory annual reports to the government.

In **Rwanda**, there was a restrictive atmosphere for the functioning of civil society. Domestic and international NGOs are required by law to register each year and to provide reports to the government on their activities. Authorities reportedly required some NGOs to obtain government authorization for some projects before being allowed to access international donor funds. In

addition, all NGOs were expected to join a collective intended to manage their activities.

The **Venezuelan** government continued to harass and intimidate civil society groups, most notably the leaders of the electoral watchdog NGO Sumate, whose trial for conspiracy and treason for accepting a foreign grant was indefinitely postponed but continues to hang over their heads. At year's end a draft law was under consideration in the National Assembly which, if implemented, would increase government control over NGOs' financing and restrict NGOs from working in the areas of human rights or democracy promotion. Amendments to the penal code that impose prison sentences for insulting public officials and violent attacks on journalists contributed to a climate of self-censorship. The government stepped up its harassment of independent and opposition news outlets. In December President Chavez announced that the government would not renew the broadcast license of Radio Caracas Television, the country's oldest commercial television network. The government accused the network owners of being "coup-mongers" and of violating the public trust.

In **China**, NGOs, both domestic and international, continued to face increased scrutiny and restrictions. By the end of 2006, Reporters without Borders reported that 31 journalists and 52 Internet writers were in jail.

While the government encouraged use of the Internet, it also took steps to monitor its use, control content, restrict information, and punish those who violated regulations. The government imposed stricter website registration requirements, enhanced official control of online content, and expanded the definition of illegal online content. The government consistently blocked access to sites it deemed controversial, and the authorities reportedly began to employ more sophisticated technology enabling the selective blocking of specific content rather than entire websites.

Vietnam continued to monitor and restrict the Internet, blocking international human rights and news websites. Laws allow citizens to complain openly about inefficient government and corruption, but the government continued to prohibit the press from drafting articles that questioned the role of the Communist Party, promoted pluralism or multiparty democracy, or questioned human rights policy. The government forbids direct access to the Internet through Independent Service Providers and requires cybercafé owners to register the personal information of their customers and the sites visited. The government released several high-profile political and religious dissidents, including Dr. Pham Hong Son, who was imprisoned for translating articles on democracy and disseminating them over the Internet.

Genocide was the most sobering reality of all.

Almost 60 years after the adoption of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights--an expression of the outraged conscience of mankind to the enormity of the Holocaust and the cataclysm of the Second World War--genocide continued to ravage the Darfur region of **Sudan**.

Despite the January 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement ending the 22-year civil war between the north and south, and the establishment of a unity government that year, ethnic conflict continued in **Sudan**, most catastrophically in Darfur. The Sudanese government and government-backed janjaweed militia bear responsibility for the genocide in Darfur, and all parties to the conflagration committed serious abuses, including the widespread killing of civilians, rape as a tool of war, systematic torture, robbery, and recruitment of child soldiers. By the end of 2006, the Darfur conflict had resulted in at least 200,000 civilian deaths and two million displaced by the fighting. Over 234,000 refugees had fled to neighboring Chad, and both Chad and the Central African Republic experienced violent ethnic conflict along their borders with Sudan.

In spite of indicating its support for the Addis Ababa framework, the Sudanese government publicly rejected international forces for Darfur and renewed its military offensive during the latter half of 2006. The deteriorating security conditions forced some international NGOs and humanitarian organizations to scale back or suspend operations.

Defend the Defenders

If the great promise of the [UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) is to be fulfilled, the international community--and especially the world's democracies--cannot accept that today's sobering realities are impervious to change. Indeed, they compel us to align ourselves with those who work for human dignity and political reform.

In 2006 the courageous efforts of human rights defenders were highlighted by democratic governments:

Country resolutions passed by the **United Nations General Assembly** in 2006 emphasized the need to protect human rights defenders in Iran, Belarus, North Korea, and Burma.

The **UN Democracy Fund**, growing out of an idea presented to the General Assembly by President Bush in 2004 and established in

2005, completed its first year successfully. Its board agreed to fund 125 projects out of more than 1,300 proposals submitted by over 100 countries--a disbursement of more than \$35 million in grants mostly to prodemocracy civil society organizations.

At the regional level, in June 2006 the General Assembly of the **Organization of American States** (OAS) adopted the Declaration of Santo Domingo, a groundbreaking multilateral commitment by the countries of the region to "guarantee the liberty of every person to enjoy freedom of expression, including access to uncensored political debate and the free exchange of ideas through all forms of mass media, including the Internet." The Foreign Ministers also declared their resolve to develop and encourage strategies and best practices to that effect.

The OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' Unit for Human Rights Defenders issued a report on the serious problems they face in some countries, emphasizing the need for governments to support their work.

In advance of the July **African Union** Assembly of the Heads of State, civil society organizations from 19 African countries met in Banjul, The Gambia, to develop recommendations for summit leaders regarding civil society's role in the African Peer Review Mechanism on countries' compliance with treaty obligations, ways to improve access to information by civil society, and citizenship laws that entrench discrimination. These recommendations were adopted at the summit.

In the **Broader Middle East and North Africa** region the **Forum for the Future** brought together government officials and civil society representatives from the region, along with G-8 partners, at the Dead Sea in Jordan. Nearly 50 civil society leaders representing hundreds of organizations from 16 countries of the region participated in discussions on the rule of law, transparency, women's and youth empowerment, and the legal environment for civil society organizations. They also discussed how to strengthen reform by establishing mechanisms to follow up on recommendations. Though the hardest part lies ahead--adoption and implementation of recommendations put forward by civil society--the Forum helped to open political space that did not before exist for civil society organizations to form and interact with governments in the region.

Marking International Human Rights Day in December 2006, Secretary Rice launched two important U.S. initiatives in support of human rights and democracy defenders:

She announced the creation of a **Human Rights Defenders Fund** to be administered by the State Department that will quickly disburse small grants to help human rights defenders facing extraordinary needs as a result of government repression. This funding could go to cover legal defense, medical costs, or the pressing needs of activists' families.

Secretary Rice also issued ten guiding [NGO Principles](#) regarding the treatment by governments of nongovernmental organizations. These core principles will guide U.S. treatment of NGOs, and we also will use them to assess the actions of other governments. The principles are meant to complement lengthier, more detailed United Nations and other international documents addressing human rights defenders and can help to rally worldwide support for embattled NGOs by serving as a handy resource for governments, international organizations, civil society groups, and journalists.

When democracies support the work of human rights advocates and civil society organizations, we are helping men and women in countries across the globe shape their own destinies in freedom. And by so doing, we are helping to build a safer, better world for all.

We must defend the defenders, for they are the agents of peaceful, democratic change.

COMOROS

The Union of the Comoros is a constitutional, multiparty republic of approximately 690,000 citizens. The country consists of three islands--Grande Comore, Anjouan, and Moheli--and claims a fourth, Mayotte, which France governs. In May citizens elected President Ahmed Abdallah Mohamed Sambi in polling that international observers described as free and fair; Sambi's May 26 inauguration was the first peaceful and democratic transfer of power in the country's history. Disputes continued over the division of responsibilities between union and island governments and the union government's nonpayment of salary to its employees, including teachers and doctors. The civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces.

The government generally respected the human rights of its citizens, although there were some areas of concern. The following human rights problems were reported: poor prison conditions, restrictions on freedom of religion, official corruption, discrimination against women, child abuse, and child labor.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and law prohibit such practices, and there were no reports that government officials employed them.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions remained poor; common problems included improper sanitation, overcrowding, inadequate medical facilities, and poor diet. Authorities held pretrial detainees with convicted prisoners. The government permitted visits by independent human

rights observers, as well as the UN Development Program and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention, and the government generally observed these prohibitions.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

Six separate security forces report to four different authorities. A union military and a union gendarmerie handle defense and local policing on Grand Comore and Moheli; Anjouan maintains its own gendarmerie. The union police force handles immigration and some local policing in Grand Comore. Each of the three islands also has its own local police force.

There was continued corruption in the police force. Citizens paid bribes to evade customs regulations, avoid arrest, falsify police reports or, for police personnel, to receive promotion within the force. Impunity was a problem, as there was no mechanism to investigate police abuses. Union police took part in international training to become more professional.

Arrest and Detention

The law requires warrants for arrests and provides that detainees may be held for 24 hours, although these provisions were not always respected in practice. The procurer general must approve continued detention. A tribunal informs detainees of their rights, including the right to legal representation. According to the law, public attorneys are available to indigent individuals, but in practice there was a dearth of legal representation. There is a bail system under which the individual is not permitted to leave the country.

After taking office in May, President Sambi granted amnesty to hundreds of "short term" prisoners, including those held for proselytizing, to alleviate prison crowding.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected this provision in practice. The head of state appoints magistrates by decree.

The seven-member Constitutional Court includes a member appointed by the president of the Union, a member appointed by each of the two union vice presidents, a member appointed by each of the three island government presidents, and a member appointed by the

president of the National Assembly. Minor disputes can be reviewed by the civilian court of first instance, but in practice they are often settled by village elders outside of the formal structure. Juries decide criminal cases, which can be reviewed before the appellate court.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the right to a fair trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right. Trials are mostly open to the public. Juries deliberate criminal cases, and there is an appeal process. The legal system incorporates French legal codes and Islamic Shari'a law. In practice village elders decided most disputes without using the formal legal system.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

By law there is an independent and impartial judiciary for civil matters. In practice formal courts have insufficient resources and are rife with corruption. Most civil disputes are settled outside the formal court system, either directly between the parties or via informal community arbitration by respected elders.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution and law prohibit such actions, and the government generally respected these prohibitions in practice.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution and law provide for freedom of speech and of the press; however, the government partially limited press freedom.

Paramilitary police detained Aboubacar M'changama, director of the independent weekly *l'Archipel*, from March 25 to 27 for "divulging military secrets." Aboubacar had published an article about discontent in the military.

There was a government-supported newspaper, *Al-Watwan*, and four independent papers, *Kashkazi*, *Le Canal*, *La Gazette des Comores*, and *l'Archipel*. The Anjouan island government intimidated journalists to deter them from writing articles critical of the

government. (No newspapers were printed in Anjouan, but the papers listed above were available there.)

There is independent radio on all three islands. One government radio station operated on a regular schedule. Local community radio stations operated in very narrow transmission areas. Citizens who lived overseas primarily funded these stations, which were staffed by volunteers and were allowed to operate without government interference or regulation. Mayotte Radio and French television also broadcast without government interference. Several small, community-based television stations operated without government interference; local residents and their relatives overseas provided funds for their operation.

Prior to the presidential election in May, the union military temporarily confiscated the equipment of Radio Moheli, because the station's broadcasts were controversial. In May persons not in uniform vandalized radio equipment at Radio Ngazidja and Moroni FM in Grand Comore. While never proven, press reports suggested the attacks were politically motivated.

Internet Freedom

There were no government restrictions on access to the Internet or reports that the government monitored e-mail or Internet chatrooms. Individuals and groups could engage in the peaceful expression of views via the Internet, including by electronic mail. Illiteracy and shortages of electricity and phone lines limited Internet use to the small, relatively wealthy and educated minority of Comorans. Several Internet cafes and the Internet stations at the American Corner in Moroni have expanded usage in and near cities.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution and law provide for freedom of assembly and association; however, in practice the government did not always respect this right. Unlike in the previous year, however, no deaths or injuries resulted from excessive use of force by security forces.

No action was taken by authorities concerning the killing by soldiers of one civilian, and wounding of 16 others, in

connection with a massive protest against a fuel price hike in September 2005.

Freedom of Association

The constitution and law provide for freedom of association, and the government generally respected this right.

c. Freedom of Religion

The constitution and law provide for freedom of religion; however, the government restricted this right in practice. The constitution does not declare Islam the official religion but declares that the laws must draw inspiration from Islam. The great majority of the population was Sunni Muslim. Proselytizing for any religion except Islam was illegal.

On May 29, four men were sentenced to three months in prison for "evangelizing Muslims." One woman was also convicted and received a three-month suspended sentence. They had been arrested one week earlier for hosting Christian religious debates in a private residence. After 40 days, all four were released in the presidential amnesty.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Christians continued to face intense social pressure, including restricting the use of the few Christian churches to noncitizens. Family and community members were likely to harass those who join non-Muslim faiths.

There was no known Jewish population and no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

For a more detailed discussion, see the *2006 International Religious Freedom Report*.

d. Freedom of Movement within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The constitution and law provide for these rights, and the government generally respected them in practice.

In June *Le Canal* reported that police conducted late night home inspections in search of "illegal immigrants."

Intervillage conflicts sometimes restricted movement of citizens within the country's borders. There were cases of individuals from Grand Comore being refused entry into Moheli and Anjouan; this was not, however, by central government policy.

The law does not prohibit forced exile, but the government did not use it.

Protection of Refugees

The law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status in accordance with the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol, and the government has not established a system for providing protection to refugees. In practice the government provided some protection against *refoulement*, the return of persons to a country where they feared persecution, but it did not grant refugee or asylum status routinely.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The constitution and law provides citizens with the right to change their government peacefully, and citizens exercised this right in practice through periodic, free, and fair elections held on the basis of universal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

The constitution provides for a "rotating" presidency in which each island takes a turn at holding a primary for presidential candidates. Former president Azali, a native of Grand Comore, was the first to hold office in this system. During the year the turn passed to Anjouan; all 12 presidential candidates had to be natives of Anjouan to run in the primary. From the 12, Anjouan voters selected three to run in the May national election that led to the election of President Sambi. International observers considered the elections free and fair. The May 26 inauguration of President Sambi was the first peaceful and democratic transfer of power in the country's history. The constitution thus restricts, by island, who can run for the presidency, but aside from the rotation principle, anyone is free to run.

Unelected elders leading traditional social, religious, and economic institutions filled voids in communities where the formal government was ineffectual or nonexistent.

There was one woman in the 33-member National Assembly. There was one female minister and two female vice presidents in the union government. There were no minorities in high-level offices.

Government Corruption and Transparency

Resident diplomatic, UN, and humanitarian agency workers reported that petty corruption is commonplace at all levels of the civil service. The new Sambi government launched a highly-publicized campaign against embezzlement by senior officials, bribery by customs and immigration officers, and unfair or non-transparent practices for offering government contracts and procurement. The few private sector operators in the country reported that corruption and lack of transparency were the norm.

In June the government arrested several officials of the former regime on charges of corruption. Former government ministers Rehema and Sitti and former Colonel Abdallah of the union police were tried for stealing administrative property, convicted, sentenced to eight months in prison, and fined \$360 (147,000 Comoran Francs). Former secretary general Abdou was convicted on the same charge and sentenced to four months' imprisonment and fined \$480 (196,000 Comoran Francs).

In 2005 there were allegations that private firms such as Comoros Hydrocarbure and Comoros Telecom partially financed the predecessor Azali government by providing funds for official travel. However, there were no reports that the newly installed Sambi government continued the practice.

Investigations continued into the 2005 award of government contracts to a firm with ties to former president Azali.

There are no laws providing for public access to government information. Those who have personal or working relationships with government officials can generally access government information, but not members of the general public. To encourage greater transparency, President Sambi published his own salary in August.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

One domestic and some international nongovernmental organizations operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were cooperative and responsive to their views.

In June the National Assembly passed a law establishing a human rights commission, which had not yet convened by year's end.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, sex, disability, language, or social status; however, there was discrimination against women.

Women

The law prohibits domestic violence. Although the government did not take any action to combat violence against women, police and human rights groups believe it to be rare. Women could seek protection through the courts in such cases, but in practice the extended family or village elders customarily addressed such problems.

Rape is illegal, punishable by imprisonment of five to 10 years or up to 15 years if the victim is younger than 15 years of age. The government did not enforce the laws on rape effectively. The law does not specifically address spousal rape.

Prostitution is illegal, arrests for prostitution are rare, and there were no reports of harassment of prostitutes.

Sexual harassment is illegal and punishable by up to 10 years' imprisonment. Although rarely reported due to societal pressure, such harassment was nevertheless a common problem.

The law provides for equality of persons, and in general, inheritance and property rights do not discriminate against women. Men retained the dominant role in society, although the matriarchal tradition afforded women some rights, especially in terms of landholding. Societal discrimination against women was most apparent in rural areas where women had farming and childrearing duties and fewer opportunities for education and wage employment. In urban areas growing numbers of women were employed and generally earned wages comparable to those of men engaged in similar work; however, few women held positions of responsibility in business. The law does not require women to wear head coverings, but many women faced societal pressure to do so.

Children

The government has not taken any specific action to protect or promote children's welfare. Because of a lack of inspectors, the government does not enforce legal provisions that address the rights and welfare of children.

Education is free and compulsory for children below the age of 16, but the government rarely provided public school education for children past the age of 14. According to UNICEF, 31 percent of children attended elementary school between 1996 and 2004.

During the school year, teacher strikes over nonpayment of salaries interrupted school several times. Boys generally had greater access to schools than did girls.

Boys and girls had equal access to state-provided medical care, which was limited.

Although there are no official statistics on child abuse, it was common, and often occurred when impoverished families sent their children to work for wealthier families. A 2002 UNICEF study found that child abuse, including sexual abuse, was widespread and often occurred at home. There also were reports that teachers raped students. In December 2005, for example, the newspaper *Kashkazi* reported the death of an 11-year-old girl who had been raped by her teacher and subsequently died in childbirth. The teacher was suspended from his position, but no arrests were made.

Child prostitution and child pornography are illegal. The law considers unmarried children under the age of 18 as minors, and they are protected legally from sexual exploitation, prostitution, and pornography. There were no statistics regarding these matters, but they were not considered serious problems.

Child labor occurred (see section 6.d.).

Trafficking in Persons

The law does not prohibit trafficking in persons; however, there were no reports that persons were trafficked to, from, or within the country.

Persons with Disabilities

There are no laws that mandate access to buildings for persons with disabilities or that prohibit discrimination in employment and public services. In general, persons with disabilities were likely to face discrimination, but specific reports were not available relating to employment, education, access to health care, or in the provision of other state services.

In April the country's first handicapped center opened in Ikoni, Grand Comore.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law allows workers to form and join unions of their choice without previous authorization or excessive requirements, and

many of those in the wage labor force did so in practice. The wage labor force, however, was less than 7,000 persons, of whom approximately 5,000 were government employees. Teachers, civil servants, taxi drivers, and dockworkers were unionized. Approximately 80 percent of the population engaged in farming on small land holdings, subsistence fishing, and local commerce.

The labor code, which was rarely enforced, does not include a system for resolving labor disputes.

The law does not prohibit anti-union discrimination by employers in hiring practices.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law protects workers from employer interference in their right to organize and administer their unions, and the government protected this right in practice. Unions have the right to bargain collectively, although employers set wages in the small private sector, and the government, especially the ministries of finance and labor, set them in the larger public sector. There are no export processing zones.

The law provides for the right to strike, and government employees exercised this right to protest non-payment of salaries. There are no laws protecting strikers from retribution, but there were no reported instances of retribution.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor by adults but not by children. There were some reports that such practices occurred (see section 6.d.).

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law defines 15 as the minimum age for employment, but the government did not always enforce this law. Children usually worked in subsistence farming and fishing. Some families placed their children in the homes of wealthier families where they worked in exchange for food, shelter, or educational opportunities. Other forms of child labor generally were not a problem due to the lack of wage employment opportunities. A 2000 UNICEF study found that approximately 15 percent of children were not paid for their work. The actual number was likely higher. The government did not actively enforce child labor laws nor did it seek to prevent illegal child labor.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There was no minimum wage. At various times during the year, the government did not pay civil servant salaries (see section 6.b.). Despite strikes and other protests, the union government was unable to pay government employees, including low-level government officials, teachers, and medical workers, for several months due to budgetary difficulties.

The law specifies a workweek of 37½ hours, one day off per week, and one month of paid vacation per year. According to the law, workers receive time-and-a-half for overtime. These laws, like many others, were not enforced. Employers, particularly the government, were often remiss in paying salaries.

No safety or health standards have been established for work sites. Workers generally could not remove themselves from an unsafe or unhealthful situation without risking their employment.