U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Iceland

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Iceland, with a population of 313,000, is a constitutional parliamentary republic. The president is the head of state; a prime minister, usually the head of the majority party, is head of government. There is a unicameral parliament (Althingi). In 2004 Olafur Ragnar Grimsson was reelected president in free and fair elections. After parliamentary elections on May 12, the center-right Independence Party and the Social Democratic Alliance formed a governing coalition led by Prime Minister Geir Haarde (Independence Party). The elections were free and fair. Civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces.

The government generally respected the human rights of its citizens, and the law and judiciary provided effective means of addressing individual instances of abuse. The following human rights problems were reported: violence against women, societal discrimination against minorities and foreigners, and isolated reports of women trafficked to, through, and possibly from the country.

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 and detention center conditions generally met international standards, and the government permitted visits by independent human rights observers.

Although rare, there were reports of prisoner violence, which sometimes involved prisoners brutalizing other inmates. Prison authorities took steps to address the issue.

Prison authorities reported that hiring of additional psychologists and psychiatrists had decreased delays in providing psychological and psychiatric services to prisoners, although some delays still occurred. Emergency needs received immediate attention.

In October prison authorities completed the upgrade of the Kviabryggja minimum-security prison, and renovation work on the Akureyri prison was underway at year's end with completion expected in 2008. The government budget for 2008 contained funds for the expansion and renovation of the main prison at Litla-Hraun. Completion of these projects should eliminate overcrowding in the prison and detention system.

During the year media and prison authorities expressed concern regarding overcrowding at Reykjavik's main pretrial detention facility. In such cases, pretrial detainees can be held in local police station jails, a system which has proven sufficient to ease overcrowding and prevent cohousing of pretrial detainees and convicted prisoners.

The government maintained a separate minimum−security prison for female inmates; however, because so few women were incarcerated (five or six on average) some men were also held there. Men housed in facilities with women were closely monitored and only interacted with women in the common areas; they did not share cellblocks. In the rare instances when juvenile offenders were incarcerated, they were held with adults, since there was no separate facility for juveniles.

The government permitted visits by independent human rights observers during the year. Prisoners could, and did, request visits from volunteers from the Icelandic Red Cross, or so−called "prisoners' friends." The volunteers talked with the prisoners and provided them with second−hand clothes upon request. There were no prison visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross during the year.

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

Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the police (the country's only security force), and the government has effective mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse and corruption. There were no reports of impunity involving the security forces during the year.

Arrest and Detention

Police may make arrests under a number of circumstances: when they believe a prosecutable offense has been committed, where necessary to prevent further offenses or destruction of evidence, to protect the suspect's safety, or when the person refuses to obey police orders to move. Arrest warrants were usually not required; the criminal code explicitly requires warrants only for arrests when individuals fail to present themselves in court to attend a hearing or a trial, or to prison to serve a sentence.

Persons placed under arrest are entitled to legal counsel, which is provided by the government if they are indigent. Authorities must inform persons under arrest of their

rights and must bring them before a judge within 24 hours. The judge determines whether a suspect must remain in custody during the investigation; the judge may grant conditional release, subject to assurances that the accused will appear for trial.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence in practice.

Trial Procedures

The constitution provides for the right to a fair trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right.

Courts do not use juries, but multi-judge panels are common, particularly in the Supreme Court. The courts presume defendants' innocence and generally try them without delay. Defendants receive access to legal counsel of their own choosing. For defendants unable to pay attorneys' fees, the government covers the cost; however, defendants who are found guilty must reimburse the government. Defendants have the right to be present at their trial, to confront witnesses, and to participate in the proceedings. They and their attorneys have access to government−held evidence relevant to their cases. At the discretion of the courts, prosecutors may introduce evidence that police obtained illegally. Defendants have the right to appeal, and the Supreme Court handles appeals expeditiously.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

A single court system handles both criminal and civil matters. The two levels of the judiciary−−the district courts and the Supreme Court−−are generally considered independent and impartial in civil matters. Law suits may be brought seeking damages for, or cessation of, a human rights violation.

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

The constitution prohibits such actions, and the government generally respected this prohibition in practice.

In order to obtain a permit to stay in the country based on marriage to a citizen or the holder of a resident permit, a partner or spouse must be at least 24 years of age. During the year the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance expressed concern about this requirement because it limits the right of foreigners to family reunification; however, there was no official action by year's end in response to these concerns.

Women's activists voiced concern that individuals from countries outside the European Economic Area (EEA) can lose their residence permits upon divorce from Icelandic-born spouses, with possible consequences pertaining to child custody and visitation.

Immigration law allows authorities to conduct house searches without a prior court order when there is a significant risk that delay would jeopardize an investigation of immigration fraud; they may also request DNA tests without court supervision in cases where they suspect immigration fraud. In practice neither home searches without warrants nor DNA tests took place during the year.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respected these rights in practice. An independent press, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to ensure freedom of speech and of the press.

The law establishes fines and imprisonment of up to three months for those who publicly deride or belittle the religious doctrines of a lawful religious association active in the country. Additionally, the law establishes fines and imprisonment of up to two years for anyone who publicly ridicules, slanders, insults, threatens, or in any other manner publicly assaults, a person or a group of people on the basis of their nationality, skin color, race, religion, or sexual orientation. There were no reports that the law was invoked during the year.

The independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views without restriction.

Internet Freedom

There were no government restrictions on access to the Internet or reports that the government monitored e-mail or Internet chat rooms. Individuals and groups could engage in the peaceful expression of views via the Internet, including by e-mail.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

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

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution provides for freedom of assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights in practice.

c. Freedom of Religion

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respected this right in practice; however, the state financially supported and promoted the official religion, Lutheranism. Other religions did not receive equal time and deference in school curricula or comparable subsidies for their faith−based activities.

The law specifies conditions and procedures that religious organizations must follow to be registered by the government. Such recognition was necessary for religious organizations other than the state church if they wished to receive a per capita share of church tax funds from the government. The one group that applied to register as a religious organization during the year, the Community of Christ in Reykjavik, had its application denied on grounds of not being sufficiently well established. The government did not place any restrictions or requirements on unregistered religious organizations, which had the same rights as other groups in society. Two religious groups denied registration in previous years, the Free Church of Iceland and the Baptist Church of Sudurnes, did not re-apply for registration during the year.

All citizens 16 years of age and older must pay an annual church tax of approximately $146 (9,468 krona). For persons who were not registered as belonging to a religious organization, or who belonged to one that was not registered and officially recognized, the tax payment went to the University of Iceland, a secular institution. Atheists and humanists objected to having their fees go to the university, asserting that this was inconsistent with the right of freedom of association.

In October the Supreme Court upheld the November 2006 verdict of the Reykjavik District Court rejecting the Icelandic Pagan Association's request for funding proportional to its membership from monies currently made available only to the national church.

The Pagan Society of Iceland began construction of a place of worship during the summer. In July the city of Reykjavik agreed to make a plot of land available for the construction of a Russian Orthodox church. In contrast, a 2000 application for land to build a mosque continued to languish in Reykjavik's planning commission. Some observers attributed the delay to prejudice, particularly given that other groups' applications for similar plots made swifter progress during that time.

The law mandates religious instruction in Christianity in the public schools; however, students may be exempted from attending the classes upon parental request.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The Jewish community numbers under 100 individuals; there were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

The law establishes penalties of fines and up to two years in prison for verbal or physical assault on an individual or group based on religion. The law also establishes fines and imprisonment of up to three months for those who publicly deride or belittle the religious doctrines of a lawful religious association active in the country. There were no reports that the law was invoked during the year.

For a more detailed discussion, see the *2007 International Religious Freedom Report*.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The constitution provides for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights in practice.

The law prohibits forced exile, and the government did not employ it.

Protection of Refugees

The law provides 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 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 there is reason to believe they feared persecution. The government granted refugee status or asylum. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees, but it had no fixed refugee acceptance requirements. In February the government decided to double its refugee admissions, receiving a group of 25 refugees every year, instead of every other year.

Asylum seekers were eligible for state-subsidized health care during the processing of their cases, which at times took a year or more. They could enroll their children in public schools after being in the country for three months, and some children of asylum seekers were enrolled in public schools during the year. Asylum seekers could also apply for work permits. However, human rights advocates criticized the law for not specifying which "significant human rights reasons" must underpin granting temporary residence (and eligibility for work permits) while asylum cases are processed, arguing that the situation created the possible appearance of arbitrary decisions. This echoed such groups' criticism of the vagueness of criteria for granting asylum.

Since 1984 only one person has been granted asylum as a political refugee. Officials rejected most asylum applications and eventually deported most applicants; however, some asylum seekers have been accepted on humanitarian grounds. The minister of justice appoints the director of immigration, who heads the deciding body for asylum cases. Some observers have asserted, as the Council of Europe commissioner for human rights did in a 2005 report, that this hierarchy could constitute a conflict of interest. The law is ambiguous about the criteria for granting and denying asylum, and this ambiguity, combined with the low number of approved asylum applications, left unclear the considerations that are applied in adjudicating the applications of asylum seekers. The law allows for accelerated refusal of applications deemed to be "manifestly unfounded."

Asylum seekers also faced other impediments. Asylum seekers had no access to the court system. They could address appeals against negative decisions only to the Ministry of Justice.

The government took no action, and none was expected, in response to concerns expressed by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2005 about reports that border guards did not always handle asylum requests properly.

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

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

Elections and Political Participation

The most recent presidential election was held in 2004, when Olafur Ragnar Grimsson won 85.6 percent of the valid votes for his third term in this mostly ceremonial office. In elections to the 63-member unicameral parliament on May 12, voters turned the Progressive Party (PP) out of power, and the Independence Party (IP) and Social Democratic Alliance (SDA) formed a new coalition government led by Prime Minister Geir Haarde of the IP. The new coalition held 43 seats.

There were 21 women in the parliament and four women in the 12-member cabinet. Two of nine Supreme Court members and 13 of 38 district court judges were women. No members of minority groups held seats in the parliament.

Government Corruption and Transparency

There were no reports of government corruption during the year.

The law provides for public access to government information, and the government provided access in practice for citizens and noncitizens, including foreign media. Appeals against refusals by government authorities to grant access to materials may be referred to an information committee consisting of three persons appointed by the prime minister. Permanent employees of government ministries may not be members of the committee. Public officials were not subject to financial disclosure laws.

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

A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were cooperative and responsive to their views.

The Icelandic Human Rights Center was the leading human rights organization, vetting government legislation and reporting to international treaty monitoring bodies as well as promoting human rights education and research. The center was funded primarily by the government but also by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), unions, and the city of Reykjavik; it operated as an NGO.

An independent ombudsman, elected by parliament, monitored and reported to national and local authorities on human rights developments to ensure that residents, whether citizens or aliens, received equal protection. Individuals could lodge complaints with the ombudsman regarding decisions, procedures, and conduct of public officials and government agencies. The ombudsman may demand official reports, documents, and records, may summon officials to give testimony, and has access to official premises. The ombudsman has noted in the last three annual reports that government agencies responded slowly to requests for information and documents, causing delays in the handling of cases. The government has never responded to these complaints. While the ombudsman's conclusions are not binding on authorities, his recommendations were generally followed.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution provides that everyone shall be equal before the law and enjoy human rights irrespective of gender, race, social status, or language. Various laws implement these principles, and the government effectively enforced them.

Women

Rape carries a maximum penalty of 16 years in prison. Judges typically imposed sentences of one to three years. Spousal rape is not explicitly addressed in the law. As in previous years, the Icelandic Counseling and Information Center for Survivors of Sexual Violence (Stigamot) in Reykjavik noted that the number of reported rapes has consistently risen faster than the number of convictions for rape. According to national police commissioner statistics, there were 67 reported rapes in 2006, consistent with the annual average of 64 in the 2001-2005 period. In 2006 prosecutors brought charges in 26 percent of sexual assault cases, and district courts convicted 10 of the 18 defendants. During the year, activists continued to echo a 2005 UN Human Rights Committee concern that what it considered a heavy burden of proof for rape complainants was leading to a low conviction rate. The government did not address this point in its response to the committee's concerns.

The law prohibits domestic violence; however, violence against women continued to be a problem. Police statistics indicated that the incidence of reported violence against women, including rape and sexual assault, was low; however, the number of women seeking medical and counseling assistance indicated that many incidents went unreported. During the year 101 women sought temporary lodging at the country's shelter for women, mainly because of domestic violence. The shelter offered counseling to 370 clients. Also during the year, 130 women sought assistance at the National Hospital's Rape Crisis Center.

Legislation enacted in April 2006 permits judges to increase the sentences of persons who committed violence against persons with whom they had a domestic relationship or other close bond. However, there were no prominent domestic violence cases in which judges actually handed down stronger sentences, and activists expressed concern that sentences were still too mild. Neither the Ministry of Justice nor the Office of the State Prosecutor maintained specific statistics on prosecutions and convictions for domestic abuse.

In January a Nigerian woman was granted a residence permit on humanitarian grounds due to domestic abuse by her Icelandic husband. This was the first case of its kind, and while applauded by activists, the government's ad hoc decision was also criticized for not setting any clear framework for future similar cases.

The government helped finance Stigamot (the country's primary counseling and information center for survivors of sexual violence), the Women's Shelter, the rape crisis center of the National Hospital, and other organizations that provided assistance to victims of violence. In addition to partially funding such services, the government provided help to immigrant women in abusive relationships, offering emergency accommodation, counseling, and information on legal rights. Courts could issue restraining orders, but there were complaints that police were reluctant to recommend them and that courts granted them only in extreme circumstances. Victims of sexual crimes were entitled to lawyers to advise them of their legal rights and help them pursue cases against the alleged assailants; however, a large majority of victims declined to press charges or chose to forgo trial, in part to avoid unwanted publicity. Some local human rights monitors also attributed underreporting to the infrequency of convictions, due to the heavy burden of proof and to traditionally light sentences. While average sentences for domestic violence showed a gradual increase, the courts continued in many cases to base sentences on precedent and rarely made full use of the more stringent sentencing authority available under the law. According to statistics from the Women's Shelter, 19 percent of their clients pressed charges in 2006, up from 13 percent in 2005.

Prostitution was legal but rare. The parliament passed a bill in March making prostitution legal even as a main source of income, yet banning its advertisement. The new law also states that it is illegal for a third party, or pimp, to profit from prostitution or procurement of sex, as well as the renting of facilities for prostitution. Critics of the new legislation feared that it would result in the emergence of red light districts and sex tourism.

There were concerns that some foreign women were trafficked to work as exotic dancers or in massage parlors where sexual services are offered.

The law prohibits sexual harassment and stipulates that violations are punishable by fines; however, the law was not effectively enforced. There was no central authority that plaintiffs could report to, or from which they could seek redress, and employers were free to decide whether to provide their employees with information on the legal prohibitions against sexual harassment in the workplace. As in past years, gender equality advocates reported receiving several complaints during the year. However, the charges never became court cases, suggesting that victims were unsure how to proceed with their claims and skeptical as to their reception.

Women enjoy the same legal rights as men, including under family law, property law, and the judicial system. Despite laws that require equal pay for equal work, a pay gap existed between men and women. According to a 2006 study commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs, women on average earned 15.7 percent less than men in the same professions.

Affirmative action provisions in the law state that if women are underrepresented in a certain profession, employers have an obligation to hire female candidates over equally qualified male candidates.

The government continued to fund a center for promoting gender equality to administer the Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men. The center also provided gender equality counseling and education to national and municipal authorities, institutions, companies, individuals, and NGOs. The minister of social affairs appoints members of a Complaints Committee on Equal Status, which adjudicates alleged violations of the act; the committee's rulings are not reviewable. The minister of social affairs appoints an Equal Status Council, with nine members drawn from national women's organizations, the University of Iceland, and labor and professional groups, which makes recommendations for equalizing the status of men and women in the labor market.

In June the Complaints Committee on Equal Status decided one case involving payment of parental leave benefits. The complaints committee found that the state could not discriminate between male and female applicants in payment of certain parental leave benefits and that such discrimination against a male applicant in this case was illegal and unconstitutional.

Women's activists voiced concern that women from countries outside the European Economic Area can lose their residence permits upon divorce from Icelandic-born spouses, with possible consequences pertaining to child custody and visitation.

Children

The government was strongly committed to children's rights and welfare; it funded public education and health care. School attendance is compulsory through the age of 15 and free through public university level. According to government−published statistics for 2006, approximately 93 percent of students continued to advanced secondary education.

The government provided free prenatal and infant medical care, as well as heavily subsidized childcare; girls and boys had equal access to these services.

There were reports of abuse of children during the year. In 2006 the Agency for Child Protection received 1,137 reports of abuse. Of these, 383 cited emotional abuse, 420 were related to physical abuse, and 342 to sexual abuse. (Numbers do not add up because some reports cited more than one category of abuse.) Final figures were not available for 2007, but the agency indicated that trends for the year were similar. The agency operated seven treatment centers and a diagnostic facility for abused and troubled minors. It also coordinated the work of 32 committees throughout the country that were responsible for managing child protection issues (for example, foster care) in their local areas. The local committees hired professionals knowledgeable about sexual abuse.

The government maintained a children's assessment center to accelerate prosecution of child sexual abuse cases and lessen the trauma experienced by the child. In 2006 the center conducted 194 investigative interviews, 117 children underwent assessment and therapy, and 14 medical examinations were performed. The center was intended to create a safe and secure environment where child victims might feel more comfortable talking about what happened to them. It brought together police, prosecutors, judges, doctors, and officials from child protection services. District court judges were not required to use the center, however, and could hold investigatory interviews in the courthouse instead, a practice that troubled some children's rights advocates. In practice all district courts except for the Reykjavik District Court opted to use the center's services.

The children's ombudsman, who is appointed by the prime minister but acts independently of the government, fulfilled her mandate to protect children's rights, interests, and welfare by, among other things, seeking to influence legislation, government decisions, and public attitudes. When investigating complaints, which typically involved physical and psychological abuse and inadequate accommodation for children with illnesses or disabilities, the ombudsman had access to all public and private institutions and associations that house children or otherwise care for them; however, the ombudsman's conclusions were not legally binding. The ombudsman was not empowered to address individual cases.

Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits trafficking in persons; however, there were isolated reports that persons were trafficked to, through, and possibly from, the country. The law prohibits trafficking in persons with the aim of sexual abuse or forced labor and provides for imprisonment of up to eight years for those found guilty of these offenses. During the year police did not charge any persons with trafficking.

Although information about trafficking is based on hearsay, the total number of trafficking victims during the year was less than 100. Cases fell into several categories, none of which included more than a few documented victims: undocumented Eastern European workers in construction and manufacturing who were underpaid and forced to live in substandard employer-provided housing; "mail−order" or "Internet" brides (both Eastern European and Asian) trapped with abusive, controlling Icelandic husbands, with some reports of forced prostitution; and underpaid or mistreated prostitutes and workers in nightclubs and massage parlors.

Responsibility for efforts to prevent and punish trafficking lay mainly with the Ministry of Social Affairs; the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were also involved in antitrafficking efforts. In December the government decided to draft the country's first national action plan on trafficking in persons. The deadline for the final plan was April 2008.

Women's aid groups reported evidence that foreign women were trafficked to the country to work in striptease clubs or massage parlors offering sexual services. A number of municipalities have banned private clubs that feature dancing, believed to serve as a front for prostitution and possibly trafficking. In March the parliament passed new licensing laws on the operations of entertainment establishments, which in effect outlawed strip shows as well as lap dances. The Baltic countries were the main countries of origin for women working in such clubs and parlors, with others coming from Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. There were no statistics on the number or origin of women actually trafficked.

Although the government sought to clamp down on elements of the sex industry thought to be especially complicit in trafficking, there was no coordinated government effort to investigate the trafficking phenomenon outside of the general context of increased government efforts to combat organized crime, and no public officials were specifically designated to prosecute trafficking cases.

In January the government formed an antitrafficking working group with representatives of the Ministry of Justice, law enforcement bodies, and NGOs. The group's mission was to monitor and coordinate actions to combat trafficking by improving the flow of information through direct communications channels between government institutions and NGOs. The working group is also responsible for improving conditions for the rehabilitation and repatriation of trafficking victims if necessary. The working group reports to the European Women's Lobby, an umbrella organization of women's associations in the European Union whose aims include combating violence against women.

The government provided funding for various organizations whose services included assistance to victims of trafficking; however, there was no established government assistance program specifically for victims of trafficking.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities, and there were no reports of official discrimination in employment, education, access to health care, or the provision of other state services. The law also provides that persons with disabilities receive preference for government jobs when they are at least as qualified as other applicants; however, advocates for persons with disabilities asserted that the law was not fully implemented, and that such persons constituted a majority of the country's poor.

Building regulations require that public accommodations and government buildings, including elevators, be accessible to persons in wheelchairs, that public property managers reserve 1 percent of parking spaces (a minimum of one space) for persons with disabilities, and that sidewalks outside the main entrance of such buildings be kept clear of ice and snow to the extent possible. Violations of these regulations are punishable by a fine or a jail sentence of up to two years; however, the main association for persons with disabilities complained that authorities rarely assessed penalties for noncompliance.

During the year the government initiated several projects included in its October 2006 action plan to strengthen residential services such as group homes for those with mental disabilities. The action plan, covering the years 2006-2010, also covers support services such as rehabilitation and employment participation.

The Ministry of Social Affairs was the lead government body responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. It coordinated the work of six regional offices that provided services and support to persons with disabilities. It also maintained a diagnostic and advisory center in Reykjavik that aimed to create conditions allowing persons with disabilities to lead normal lives.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Immigrants, mainly Eastern European and Baltic, were visible in the largely homogeneous population and suffered occasional incidents of harassment based on their ethnicity.

In January the government approved an immigrant integration policy drafted by the Immigrant Council, which coordinates the work of four ministries and the municipalities on immigrant and refugee issues. The aim of this policy--the first comprehensive policy on immigrant integration in the country--is to ensure equal opportunity and active participation in Icelandic society. In August the Minister of Social Affairs asked the Immigrant Council to draft an action plan to implement the policy. The action plan was expected to be completed in early 2008.

In the spring advocates for immigrant issues objected to what they viewed as xenophobic campaign slogans by one of the political parties in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. The party received 7.3 percent of the vote nationwide.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal violence or discrimination based on sexual orientation or against persons with HIV/AIDS.

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 workers exercised these rights. Labor unions were independent of the government and political parties. Approximately 82 percent of all eligible workers belonged to unions.

The law requires employers to withhold union dues (1 percent of gross pay) from all employees, regardless of their union status, to help support disability, strike, and pension funds, and to finance other benefits to which all workers are entitled.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law allows unions to conduct their activities without interference, and the government protected this right in practice. The law allows workers to bargain collectively, and workers exercised this right in practice. Nearly 100 percent of the workforce was covered by collective bargaining agreements. Workers had the right to strike and exercised this right in practice.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, including by children, and there were no reports that such practices occurred.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The government effectively implemented laws and policies to protect children from exploitation in the workplace. The law prohibits the employment of children younger than age 16 in factories, on ships, or in other places that are hazardous or require hard labor; this prohibition was observed in practice. Children 14 or 15 years old may work part−time or during school vacations in light, nonhazardous occupations. Their work hours must not exceed the ordinary work hours of adults in the same occupation. The Administration of Occupational Safety and Health enforced child labor regulations effectively.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The law does not establish a minimum wage, but the minimum wages negotiated in various collectively bargained agreements applied automatically to all employees in those occupations, regardless of union membership. While the agreements can be either industry− or sector−wide, or in some cases firm−specific, the minimum wage levels are occupation−specific. Labor contracts provided a decent standard of living for a worker and family.

The standard legal workweek was 40 hours, which included nearly three hours of paid breaks a week. Work exceeding eight hours in a workday must be compensated as overtime. Workers were entitled to 11 hours of rest within each 24−hour period and to a day off every week. Under special defined circumstances, employers may reduce the 11−hour rest period to no less than eight hours, but they then must compensate workers with one and a half hours of rest for every hour of reduction. They may also postpone a worker's day off by a week. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration effectively enforced these regulations.

There were indications that undocumented foreign workers--primarily men--in the booming construction sector were exploited by being underpaid and denied medical coverage, and were required to work long hours while living in substandard housing or even sleeping at building sites. Most sources stressed that the men willingly worked illegally to earn up to four times the amount they might have expected in their Eastern European or Baltic home countries; since restrictions on the free flow of labor from EEA/EU countries were removed in May 2006, there has been a steep rise in the number of persons coming from these countries. Media and labor organizations continued to report that a number of immigrant workers were paid wages well below the union−mandated minimum. In October the Directorate of Labor, in cooperation with the Icelandic Federation of Labor and the Ministry of Social Affairs, launched a three-month effort to scrutinize employers with undocumented foreign workers on their payrolls. The nationwide effort's emphasis was on construction firms in the Reykjavik area, and addressed an estimated 1,700 undocumented foreign workers. The effort was generally successful and identified a number of undocumented workers, two temporary worker agencies, and two service agencies in violation of the law.

The legislature set health and safety standards, and the Ministry of Social Affairs administered and enforced them through its administration of occupational safety and health. The ministry could close workplaces that failed to meet safety and health standards. Workers had a collective, but not individual, right to refuse to work at a job that did not meet occupational safety and health criteria. It is illegal to fire workers because they report unsafe or unhealthy conditions.

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