U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Belgium

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2007
Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
March 11, 2008

The Kingdom of Belgium, with a population of approximately 10.5 million, is a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarch who plays a mainly symbolic role. The country is a federal state with several levels of government, including national, regional (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels), community (Flemish, Francophone, and German), provincial, and local. The Council of Ministers (cabinet), led by the prime minister, holds office as long as it retains the confidence of the lower house (House of Representatives) of the bicameral parliament. Federal parliamentary elections held in 2007 were free and fair. The elections were monitored by Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe observers. Civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces.

The government generally respected the human rights of its citizens, and the law and the judiciary provided effective means of addressing individual instances of abuse. The following human rights problems were reported: overcrowded prisons, lengthy pretrial detention, the detention conditions prior to expulsion of children whose asylum applications were rejected, violence against women and ethnic and religious minorities, trafficking in persons, and racial and ethnic discrimination in the job market.

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 law prohibits such practices, and there were no reports that government officials employed them.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prisons met most international standards, but overcrowding remained a problem in a system where approximately 10,000 inmates occupied facilities with a capacity of 8,559. The government upgraded some older facilities, but incarcerations outpaced construction. Almost half of all inmates were foreign nationals, with the latter also accounting for about half of those in pretrial detention. The large number of noncitizen inmates prompted the authorities to acknowledge cultural problems in the prisons.

In April 2006 a report by the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) expressed concern about reports of mistreatment in police custody and about detention conditions at the special center of the Brussels national airport. This facility holds persons suspected of seeking to enter the country illegally. The report also noted that during a strike by prison wardens authorities failed to provide a decent quality of life for inmates. This failure occurred despite efforts by police, Belgian Red Cross, and civil protection teams to maintain security, family visits, and access to lawyers. In response to another concern raised by the CPT, the government enacted legislation in March to provide better treatment of detainees in psychiatric wards, while transferring responsibility for deciding on their release from prison officials to sentence implementation courts.

During the year prison wardens staged several strikes to protest overcrowding and poor working conditions; similar strikes were carried out in 2006.

Juvenile prisoners between 16 and 18 years old who had committed serious offenses were sometimes held with adults.

The government permitted visits by members of parliament and independent human rights groups, and they visited during the year. A nationwide body, the Central Control Council, oversees the prisons.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

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

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The Federal Police Council, an anticorruption unit, and the Interior Ministry managed the operations of the federal police forces. The federal police were responsible for internal security and nationwide law and order. Local police operated branches in all 196 police districts. An independent oversight committee monitored police activities and compiled an annual report for parliament. In May 2006 a federal and local police code of conduct came into force. This development, which followed a scandal involving the federal police's procurement service, led to creation of a national corruption monitoring committee.

In recent years a parliamentary oversight committee has handled over 2,000 complaints annually about police behavior. The complaints concerned discriminatory behavior, racism, failure to intervene, violations of privacy, and arbitrary detention. One in eight complaints led to formal action, including prosecution of some offenders. The oversight committee in 2006 also conducted an investigation into police conduct in connection with the expulsion of rejected asylum seekers. During the year the committee issued reports on police and prostitution, and on jail and detention conditions.

Arrest and Detention

Under the constitution, an individual can only be arrested while committing a crime or by order of a judge that must be served within 24 hours of the time of arrest. The law provides a person in detention the right to a prompt judicial determination of the legality of his detention, and the authorities generally respected this right. Detainees were promptly informed of charges against them. There is a functioning bail system, but during 2006 there was mounting controversy over the conditional release system,

which was viewed by some as being too lenient.

The fundamental rights of inmates are protected through legislation enacted in 2005 and 2006. During the year newly established implementation courts became responsible for handling release issues. Legislation was enacted allowing the authorities to keep inmates imprisoned after they completed their sentences if the court determines that their release may endanger the public.

According to 2006 figures, pretrial detainees made up 34.7 percent of the prison population. The average length of pretrial detention was 90 days.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected this provision in practice.

Trial Procedures

The constitution provides for the right to a fair trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right. All defendants are presumed innocent and have the right to be present, to have counsel (at public expense if necessary), to confront witnesses, to present evidence, and to appeal.

Judges of juvenile courts have a wide range of possibilities for mediation and sentencing young offenders. Young offenders committing serious crimes can be tried by a regular court for adults, but with youth judges present, and these offenders can be incarcerated in special youth detention centers until the age of 23.

The law authorizes jurisdiction over war crimes and crimes against humanity outside the national territory when the victim or perpetrator is a citizen of, or resides in, the country. In July the Brussels Court of Assizes handed down a 20-year prison sentence to a Rwandan national living in Belgium for his role in the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

There is an independent and impartial judiciary in civil matters. Plaintiffs can seek damages either individually or through specialized organizations for human rights violations under the applicable antidiscrimination legislation.

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

The law prohibits such actions, and the government generally respected these prohibitions in practice. In March parliament responded to public pressure for vigorous anticrime measures by enacting legislation giving a firm legal basis for the use of surveillance cameras in public areas (such as metro stations and shopping malls) and on private premises (such as stores). The law outlined stringent criteria for the use of cameras, including limitations on the retention of recorded images.

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, 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 prohibits public statements that incite national, racial, or religious hatred, including denial of the Holocaust. The maximum sentence for Holocaust denial is one year's imprisonment.

Individuals could criticize the government publicly and privately without reprisal, and the government made no attempts to impede criticism.

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. In conjunction with the government, Child Focus, a government-sponsored center for missing and exploited children, developed programs to warn users of Web sites containing illegal content, especially child pornography.

Government incentives to expand Internet access increased the total number of Internet connections to 60 percent of all households.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

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

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

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

c. Freedom of Religion

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

The law accorded "recognized" status to six religions and a grouping of nonconfessional philosophical or secular organizations, each of which received benefits from the federal and regional governments. The lack of recognized status generally did not prevent other religious groups from freely practicing their religions, and citizens generally practiced religion without official harassment or impediment. Scientologists, however, continued to experience a strained relationship with the government. In September the Federal Prosecuting Office released an official statement announcing that it had completed its investigation into the case against Church of Scientology members and affiliated nonprofit organizations and was forwarding the file to the Chamber of Indictment, the body responsible for determining if there is sufficient evidence to warrant prosecution. A decision was pending at year's end. Lawyers associated with the church filed an official complaint against the public prosecutor for leaking news of the planned charge to the press.

Early in the year the federal government reached agreement on the text of a draft bill aimed at recognizing Buddhism as a "non-confessional" philosophical community meriting state support. The justice minister later announced that the Buddhist secretariat would begin receiving subsidies in 2008.

Since 1999 the Center for Information and Advice on Harmful and Sectarian Organizations (CIAOSN), an agency funded by the Justice Ministry that provides nonbinding advice to the public, has produced 750 files on sectarian organizations, generally at the behest of members of the public requesting information about particular groups. Most queries handled by CIAOSN in 2006 and during the year concerned physical welfare and therapeutic organizations, Protestant denominations, Oriental faiths, small religions, New Age, Scientology, Catholic and dissident Catholic organizations, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

In December 2006, the Brussels Appellate Court ruled that the Interior Minister had wrongly denied a visa to Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church. The court ordered the Immigration Office to issue a visa, allowing Mr. Moon to attend a rally in the country.

During the year the Walloon regional government decided to recognize 43 mosques and the imams serving in them. The Flemish government recognized six mosques and another five were recognized by the Brussels regional government. The cities of Antwerp and Ghent issued bans on the wearing of headscarves for city employees having regular direct contact with the public.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The Center for Equal Opportunity and the Fight Against Racism (CEOOR) counted some 50 anti-Semitic incidents between January and November. In 2006 and during the year there was a noticeable increase in Internet hate messages. In addition anti-Semitic graffiti on Jewish homes and insults against Jews on the streets were reported. The size of the Jewish community is estimated at 40-50,000.

The law prohibits public statements that incite national, racial, or religious hatred, including denial of the Holocaust. The maximum sentence for Holocaust denial is one year's imprisonment.

On January 2, Federal Employment and Labor Relations Minister Peter Vanvelthoven took Turkish youths from the town of Beringen on a visit to the Anne Frank Museum in Amsterdam. This stemmed from an incident in November 2006 when the youths shouted abuse and threw stones at a group of Jewish boys visiting a coal mine museum. The youths were brought before a magistrate, who ordered them to perform community service, to pay damages, and to formally apologize to the Jewish boys.

In March a Hasselt judge handed down a community service sentence, or alternatively 7 months' imprisonment, to a man for shouting abusive anti-Semitic expressions and spitting at Israeli players during a soccer match between Belgium and Israel.

Anti-Muslim incidents also occurred during the year, but no data were available on their extent.

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 law 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. The government granted refugee status or asylum. In practice, the government provided protection against "refoulement," the return of persons to a country where there is reason to believe they feared persecution. This protection was granted to refugees coming from Ivory Coast, Iraq, Kosovo, Sudan, and Eritrea.

During the year 11,115 refugees applied for asylum, the lowest number since 2000. Most applicants came from Russia (Chechnya), Serbia, Iraq, Congo (DRC), and Afghanistan. Each year approximately 85 percent of applications are rejected.

During the year legislation came into force allowing the authorities to grant "subsidiary protection" to refugees not qualifying under the 1951 convention who could establish that upon return to their home country they would face the death penalty, torture, or other "inhuman" treatment. These refugees are entitled to material aid and have access to the labor market.

Regularization on the grounds of an unduly long application period, for urgent humanitarian reasons, and on medical grounds was granted to 11,630 applicants in 2006, and 11,335 during the year.

The government cooperated with the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees and asylum seekers.

During the verification process by the Commissariat for Refugees and Stateless Persons, applicants for refugee status received housing from a municipal assistance commission and could establish residence anywhere in the country. They could be gainfully employed. If the application was rejected, the refugee could still be eligible for material aid.

Under legislation that came into force June 1, the vetting procedure was shortened, and, in order to expedite the growing number of pending cases, appeals were no longer handled by the Council of State, but by a separate body. Regularization of undocumented aliens remained under the jurisdiction of the Minister of the Interior.

Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers were assigned to designated special centers. Each individual applicant worked directly with a custodian whose task was to assist during the application process. School-age applicants were required to attend school.

Rejected asylum seekers were informed in writing and in person of the repatriation scenarios they could choose from. The government, in partnership with the International Organization for Migration, provided relocation assistance to unsuccessful asylum applicants who agreed to return voluntarily to their country of origin. Unsuccessful applicants who did not leave voluntarily were subject to forced repatriation.

During the year scores of asylum seekers took refuge in churches and went on hunger strikes. Most of them had stayed in the country illegally after their applications were rejected. The interior minister reiterated his position that individual asylum seekers could apply to regularize their status on humanitarian or medical grounds.

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

The constitution provides citizens with the right to change their government peacefully, and citizens aged 18 and older exercised this right through periodic, free, and fair elections held on the basis of universal suffrage. Voting in all elections is compulsory. Failure to vote is punishable by a nominal fine.

Elections and Political Participation

General elections were held on June 11. The election resulted in losses for the Socialists and Flemish Liberals of the outgoing coalition of Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, and in gains for the opposition Flemish Christian Democrats and for the two Green parties. Following the election Yves Leterme, leader of the Flemish Christian Democrats, was tasked with forming a government. After six months of inconclusive negotiations, during which linguistic tension flared up, Leterme was forced to terminate his efforts. On December 21, an interim government of Christian Democrats, Socialists, and Liberals, headed by Prime Minister Verhofstadt, was sworn in by the king.

The law requires an equal number of male and female candidates on party tickets in European, federal, regional, provincial, and local elections. The constitution and law require the presence of men and women in federal, regional, provincial, and local government executive positions. Failure to implement the law would nullify the elections and render any government created thereby illegal.

There were 51 women in the 150-seat Chamber of Representatives and 27 women in the 71-seat Senate; five of the outgoing 21 federal cabinet ministers were women, and there were 12 female ministers among 34 regional ministers.

There were five members of minorities in the Chamber of Representatives and three in the Senate; one of the outgoing federal cabinet ministers was a member of a minority group, and there were two minority regional ministers.

Government Corruption and Transparency

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, and the government generally implemented these laws effectively. Corruption was not a serious problem, according to the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators. Elected officials and high-level civil servants are required to disclose any regular private employment or public jobs they hold, and to provide confidential disclosure of their financial situation.

During the year 12 civil servants and 25 private contractors were formally indicted on active and passive corruption charges in connection with public building contracts.

In October 2006 authorities arrested a number of local officials in the Charleroi and Namur areas in connection with a public housing fund scandal made public the year before by investigative journalists. Other public utility agencies became implicated in the scandal as investigations continued.

With some exceptions, such as material involving national security, the government provided unrestricted access to government information.

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 generally cooperative and responsive to their views.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, or social status, and the government generally enforced these laws; however, violence against women, trafficking in persons, and violence against minorities were problems.

Women

Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal, and the government prosecuted such cases. In 2006 police registered 2,832 rape cases. Of all cases registered between 2003 and 2005, 11 percent went to trial, 5 percent were under review by the chambers of indictment, and another 7 percent were still under investigation. A convicted rapist can be imprisoned for a minimum of 10 years to a maximum of life. The length of sentence is based on the age of the victim, the age difference between the offender and the victim, the relationship between the offender and victim, and the use or absence of violence during the commission of the crime.

Domestic violence against women, including spousal abuse, remained a problem. Reportedly, one in five women had ever been subjected to domestic violence. In 2006 (the most recent available data) the federal police reported 13,646 cases of domestic violence, compared to 11,557 the previous year. The law defines and criminalizes domestic violence and provides for fines and incarceration. The law allows police to enter a home without the consent of the head of household when investigating a domestic violence complaint; however, there were complaints that the police frequently declined to do this. By year's end the government had not fully implemented provisions of the law that require it to establish and maintain a database of statistics on domestic violence.

In March 2006 the justice minister launched an updated version of her 2004-07 action plan for dealing with domestic violence, and the regional governments formally joined the effort. The plan required police forces and prosecuting magistrates to register all complaints and official actions taken in connection with domestic violence. The minister assigned the task of handling domestic violence cases to one magistrate within each judicial district of the country.

A number of government-supported shelters and telephone help lines were available across the country for victims of domestic abuse. In addition to providing shelter and advice, many offered assistance on legal matters, job placement, and psychological counseling to both partners.

Prostitution is legal; however, the law prohibits organizing prostitution or assisting immigration for the purpose of prostitution.

Sexual harassment is illegal, and the government generally enforced the law. A victim of sexual harassment in the workplace can file a claim with a court of justice and claim damages. While the law provides victims of sexual harassment the right to sue their harassers and provides for financial remedies, most cases of sexual harassment were resolved less formally.

Women enjoy the same legal rights as men, including rights under family law, property law, and in the judicial system. The federal government's Institute for the Equality of Men and Women, which is tasked with promoting gender equality, is authorized to initiate lawsuits if it finds that equality laws have been violated.

Economic discrimination against women continued. In the public sector the average annual salary for women was 95 percent of that for men; it was 70 percent of that for men for female

white-collar workers in the private sector, and 79 percent of that for men for female blue-collar workers in the private sector. Discrimination was greatest among older workers and in higher wage categories. There was also discrimination against women in access to leading positions in both the private and public sectors.

Children

The government was committed to children's rights and welfare.

Free full-time education is compulsory from ages six to 16; subsequent education remains compulsory until the age of 18, but students may continue on a part-time basis. More than 75 percent of children over 15 finish school with a secondary diploma. Girls and boys had equal access to education.

Boys and girls had equal access to government-funded health care.

There were reports of child abuse. In 2006 the federal police registered 2,160 child abuse cases, compared to 1,922 for the previous year. As a result of awareness campaigns, specialized regional centers received growing numbers of reports of child abuse and neglect. The law provides for the protection of youth against sexual exploitation, abduction, and trafficking, and calls for severe penalties for child pornography and possession of pedophilic materials. The law permits the prosecution of residents who commit such crimes abroad and provides that criminals convicted of the sexual abuse of children must receive specialized treatment before they can be paroled and must continue counseling and treatment after their release from prison. During the year Child Focus started a new Internet-based public alert campaign called "stopchildporno.be".

According to official figures, in 2006 the federal police investigated 197 child pornography cases, and international networks operating in several countries were dismantled with the help of Europol and Eurojust**.** In several cases, judges handed down prison sentences for downloading child pornography.

Child Focus reported that it handled 3,330 cases in 2006. There were 1,101 cases of runaways (involving 1,120 individual children); 45 percent of the runaways returned home within 48 hours. The center handled 26 cases of abduction by a third person. Also that year Child Focus handled 427 cases of abduction by parents, involving 602 children; 50 percent of the cases concerned children abducted to another country.

In selected municipalities the authorities started issuing electronic identification cards to children under age 12. The card has the Child Focus phone number and facilitates safe chatting on the Internet.

Although child prostitution was not widespread, it was a problem.

During the year human rights organizations repeatedly raised concerns about the conditions under which the children of rejected asylum seekers lived--in "closed" centers--prior to their repatriation. Because they were not permitted to go outside the center they were unable to attend school. The organizations also argued that their stays in these centers were excessively long.

Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits trafficking in persons; however, there were reports that persons were trafficked to, through, and from the country. The country was a destination and transit point for women and children from Central Europe, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, primarily trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Men were trafficked for exploitive labor on construction sites and in restaurants and sweatshops. Reportedly, trafficking for forced labor and forced begging increased from previous levels. The country was listed as a destination country in the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's citation index. The government fully complied with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.

The law criminalizes recruiting, transporting, transiting, sheltering, and passing on to others the control over persons for the purpose of prostitution, child pornography, exploitation of poverty, economic exploitation, or organ transplant. The law also makes it illegal to force trafficked persons to commit crimes. Persons convicted of violating the antitrafficking law are subject to one to five years' imprisonment and are fined between $730 and $73,000 (500 to 50,000 euros). Repeat offenses, offenses of an organized nature, and those with aggravated circumstances are subject to higher penalties. If the offender belongs to a criminal organization or if the trafficking results in manslaughter, the punishment is 15 to 20 years' imprisonment and a fine ranging from $1,460 to $219,000 (1,000 to 150,000 euros).

The authorities continued to investigate and prosecute trafficking and provided victims with specialized protection and assistance. A federal coordination agency included representatives from all concerned ministries. Agencies involved in combating trafficking were connected to a secure Web site, enabling them to exchange information and to have access to all relevant information. The federal police in 2006 identified 129 criminal organizations involved in trafficking, and the federal police intercepted 28,747 illegal immigrants, including victims of trafficking.

In 2006 parliament overhauled the 1980 immigration act, bringing Belgian legislation in line with prevailing European Union (EU) directives, particularly on awarding residence to trafficking victims who cooperate with the authorities. As a result the prevailing protection system in the country obtained force of law and was extended to unaccompanied minors and other categories of vulnerable victims.

Victims have 45 days to decide whether to assist in the investigation of their traffickers and can qualify for a renewable three-month staying permit or a six-month permit, depending on the state of the judicial investigation. Victims can eventually obtain permanent residence when their traffickers are sentenced. Unaccompanied minors and victims willing to file a complaint immediately can skip the 45-day period and immediately apply for a three-month staying permit.

The government continued to subsidize three specialized trafficking shelters providing assistance to victims of trafficking, and NGOs continued to report excellent cooperation and coordination with law enforcement agencies. The shelters registered 446 victims in 2006, a decrease from the previous year, because many chose not to stay in the shelters.

Persons with Disabilities

The law provides for the protection of persons with disabilities from discrimination in employment, education, access to health care, and the provision of other state services. The CEOOR reported that 30 percent of all complaints concerned discrimination against disabled persons. Most of them concerned housing, public transport, public utilities, and access to banks, bars, and restaurants. While the government has mandated that public buildings erected after 1970 must be accessible to such persons, many older buildings were still inaccessible.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Immigrant communities complained of discrimination. Members of the Muslim community, estimated at 450,000 and principally of Moroccan and Turkish origin, claimed that discrimination against their community, notably in education and employment and particularly against young men, was greater than that experienced by other immigrant communities. In 2006 the CEOOR, which investigates complaints of discrimination, racism, and hate instigation, handled 1,649 discrimination and racism complaints. The CEOOR noted a trend of increased racial violence. The most serious incident of 2006 occurred in May when a young man went on a racially-motivated shooting spree in Antwerp, killing a toddler and the child's nanny. During the year a jury of the Antwerp Assizes Court found the man guilty on all counts, and he was sentenced to life imprisonment. In October there were several ethnically motivated skirmishes between Turks and Kurds living in Brussels, apparently sparked by tension over activities of the PKK group in Turkey and Iraq. In November unidentified persons painted racist graffiti and demolished an Antwerp snack bar operated by Moroccans.

The CEOOR also noted discrimination regarding employment, housing, and restaurant access, and an increase of racism on the Internet and in e-mail.

Five percent of the complaints of ethnic discrimination resulted in litigation initiated by the CEOOR. In 2006 the courts ruled in several landmark racial discrimination

cases and convicted Holocaust deniers and landlords who discriminated against foreigners. Judges convicted defendants for arousing racial hatred, including politicians for distributing racially offensive leaflets.

In May the Brussels Appellate Court sentenced two youths to five years' imprisonment for beating a Slovak youth unconscious.

The sentence was suspended for half the term, on condition that the convicts must not possess arms or have membership in youth gangs.

During the year four servicemen were removed from the armed forces after involvement in racial incidents.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

In its annual report for 2006, the CEOOR noted an increase in discrimination based on health or medical conditions, sexual orientation, and age. The CEOOR in 2006 registered 192 discrimination complaints based on disability. Most complaints were job-related. Courts have occasionally ruled against landlords who refuse to lease to same-sex couples.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law provides workers the right to associate freely, including the freedom to organize and to join unions of their choice, and workers exercised this right in practice. Approximately 58 percent of employed workers were members of labor unions. According to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), employers preferred to pay fines rather than reinstate workers dismissed for union activities.

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 right to bargain collectively is recognized, and the government also protected this right. The law provides for the right to strike, and workers exercised this right. In compliance with an EU directive, employers and unions reached a compromise during the year over improving collective representation in smaller enterprises. The ITUC stated that the scope of the right to strike was poorly defined.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, including by children; however, there were reports that such practices occurred.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law and policies generally protect children from exploitation in the workplace. The minimum age of employment is 15. Youths between the ages of 15 and 18 can participate in part-time work and study programs and work full-time during school vacations. Trafficking of children occurred. The labor courts effectively monitored compliance with national laws and standards; no violations were reported during the year.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The monthly national minimum wage for workers over 21 years of age was approximately $2,000 (1,360 euros). When combined with extensive social benefits, this provided a decent standard of living for a worker and family.

The standard workday is eight hours and the standard workweek is 38 hours. Departure from these norms can occur under the terms of a collective bargaining agreement, but work time may not exceed 11 hours per day and 50 hours per week. An 11-hour rest period is required between two work periods. Overtime is paid at a time-and-a-half premium Monday through Saturday and at double time on Sundays. The Ministry of Labor and the labor courts effectively enforced these laws and regulations.

Workers have the right to remove themselves from situations that endanger their safety or health without jeopardy to their continued employment, and workers exercised this right in practice. In general regulations were enforced effectively by the Employment and Labor Relations Federal Public Service.

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