



2008 Human Rights Report: Saudi Arabia

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy ruled by the Al-Saud family. The population is 28.2 million, including 5.8 million foreigners. Since 2005, King Abdullah bin Abd Al Aziz Al-Saud has ruled under the title Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, a reference to his responsibility for Islam's two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina. The government bases its legitimacy on its interpretation of Shari'a (Islamic law) and the 1992 Basic Law. The Basic Law sets out the system of governance, rights of citizens, and powers and duties of the government. The law also provides that the Koran and the Traditions (Sunna) of the Prophet Muhammad serve as the country's constitution. In 2005 the country held male only elections on a nonparty basis for half the members of municipal councils, the first elections for any government position since 1963. The civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces.

During the year the following significant human rights problems were reported: no right to change the government peacefully; beatings; judicially sanctioned corporal punishment; impunity, particularly on the part of the religious police; denial of public trials and lack of due process in the judicial system; political prisoners; incommunicado detention; restrictions on civil liberties such as freedoms of speech (including the Internet), assembly, association, movement, and severe restrictions on religious freedom; corruption; and lack of government transparency. Violence against women and discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, sect, and ethnicity were common. The sponsorship system limited the rights of foreign workers and remained a severe problem.

Improvements during the year included: increased publicly available information concerning specific instances of official corruption or of government action against corruption; no reports that authorities confiscated personal religious materials from individuals at ports of entry; and a process developed by the government for prenuptial agreements when the wife is a noncitizen, permitting her to travel without her husband's permission.

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. In contrast to the previous year, there were no reports of custodial deaths involving the government's Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), also known as the religious police, or Mutawwa'in. However, the CPVPV was involved in two high-profile car chases that ended in the deaths of the pursued parties.

On March 16, two persons--a male and a female who were not married to one another--died after a car chase involving the CPVPV in Medina. On March 31, two men and two women died after another car chase involving the CPVPV. In both cases the victims fled due to concerns over CPVPV treatment if they were found violating the country's interpretation of Shari'a, which prohibits unmarried, nonfamily persons of the opposite gender from

associating. In July authorities jailed, investigated, cleared, and released the CPVPV members involved in each of the incidents. The families of the deceased appealed the release of the CPVPV members. Also in July the president general of the CPVPV, Ibrahim al-Ghaith, announced that CPVPV members were prohibited from following fleeing suspects.

On June 6, human rights lawyer Abdel Rahman al-Lahem filed an appeal to contest a Riyadh court's acquittal of two members of the religious police in the beating death of Suleiman al-Huraisi, detained for possession and sale of alcohol in May 2007. There were no updates on the status of the appeal at year's end.

In July 2007 the Tabuk General Investigation and Prosecution Authority cleared members of the religious police of any wrongdoing in the June 2007 case of Ahmad al-Bulawi, who died in CPVPV custody after officers arrested him on suspicion of being in "illegal seclusion" with an unrelated woman. An autopsy revealed he had been beaten on the face.

There were no developments in the August 2007 case of a Bangladeshi man who died in Medina in the custody of the religious police.

During the year the press reported that the government announced executions (by beheading) of 102 individuals who were convicted of murder, narcotics related offenses, armed robbery, and rape. Court proceedings in capital cases were closed, making it impossible to determine whether the accused were allowed to present a defense or were denied basic due process. Contrary to the previous year, there were no executions for sorcery, although death sentences for two women accused of witchcraft remained in effect. The government executed 153 persons in 2007 and 37 in 2006.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances during the year.

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

The Basic Law prohibits torture, and Shari'a prohibits judges from accepting confessions obtained under duress. Nevertheless, during the year the non-governmental organization (NGO) Amnesty International (AI) continued to report that authorities systematically subjected prisoners and detainees to torture and other physical abuse. Government contacts claimed privately that measures were taken to ensure that torture did not occur in the penal system, such as alleged Ministry of Interior (MOI) formal rules prohibiting torture. The government occasionally withheld medical care from prisoners.

During the year there were reports of physical abuse by the police and the CPVPV, as well as judicially sanctioned corporal punishments.

On March 9, according to the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW), police in Khamis Mushayt (Asir region) seeking to arrest a group of 25 undocumented Yemenis, including several children, allegedly set fire to the garbage dump in which they were hiding to force them to come out. At least 18 persons suffered severe burns. The victims alleged that instead of transporting them to the hospital, the police took them in an ambulance to a police station for questioning before treating them. The government claimed the police rescued the individuals from an accidental fire. At year's end the government had not investigated the incident.

On March 30, Al-Watan newspaper reported that a Makkah court endorsed the flogging sentence of five persons who attacked the CPVPV building in Khaybar in 2007. The sentences ranged from three months' imprisonment and

250 lashes to eight months' imprisonment and 400 lashes.

On December 22, Al-Riyadh newspaper reported that the court of cassation endorsed a lower court's sentence for three persons accused of theft. One individual was sentenced to four years' imprisonment and 400 lashes, while two others received sentences of two years' imprisonment and 200 lashes.

In September an appeals court increased the sentences of Raouf El-Arabi and Shawki Abd Rabuh, Egyptian doctors for the royal family, to 15 years in prison and 1,500 lashes each. The court convicted them of malpractice after they reportedly administered inappropriate medication to a princess, and police accused them of "driving a patient to addiction."

The government also imposed corporal punishment by flogging for offenses including the harassment of women or for being alone in the company of an unrelated person of the opposite gender. There were no reports of flogging in women's prisons. There were no reports of judicially sanctioned amputation during the year.

In 2007 the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), a government-funded human rights organization, reported complaints of torture by the religious police, the General Administration of Narcotics Control, and the Directorate of General Investigations (internal security police or Mabahith). Neither the Human Rights Commission (HRC) nor the NSHR reported these abuses during the year.

Also in 2007, according to AI, at least six cases of torture and custodial death were brought against members of the religious police. In all cases, courts exonerated the CPVPV members. The unlicensed domestic human rights group Human Rights First Society (HRFS) reported in 2007 that during the past four years there was a significant decline in the use of torture in prisons, including the formal banning of the use of torture and dismissal of some officials who failed to implement this ban.

In April 2007 an Internet news Web site posted five video clips of a prison guard beating prisoners at the al Ha'ir Correctional Facility. The videos show a prison guard repeatedly beating the prisoners on the palms of their outstretched hands and the soles of one prisoner's feet. According to AI, prison authorities suspended two guards involved in the incident for 20 to 30 days.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

There were no reported prison visits during the year by the governmental HRC or the NSHR. In 2006 both the HRC and the NSHR visited prisons in accordance with international standard modalities. They found below acceptable conditions in hygiene, food, medical, and social services, prolonged detention of detainees and prisoners in poor health, and brutalization by guards in some prisons and detention centers.

During the year diplomats and human rights advocates reported that detention centers remained overcrowded, and that some prisoners who had completed their sentences were detained for additional periods of time. A May 17 Internet article Matrouk al-Faleh wrote after a visit to detainees in al-Buraida Prison described the presence of 30-40 persons in a cell appropriate for only eight to 10 inmates and lack of adequate medical attention. The article also claimed one prisoner died of medical neglect.

On October 13, the Consultative Council asked authorities to give the General Investigation and Prosecution Authority unfettered access to the country's prisons to look into the cases of prisoners who have served their jail term but remained imprisoned.

The government occasionally withheld medical care from prisoners. In the absence of visits during the year by HRC,

NSHR, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), health conditions in prisons were not directly reported by domestic organizations. In 2007 several prisoners reportedly died of tuberculosis in two prisons and there were two other health-related deaths in deportation centers. The government investigated the deaths but did not release any information on these cases.

Terror suspects were held separately from criminal suspects to prevent the spread of extremist ideology. According to diplomatic sources, these suspects were held in facilities similar to those of the general prison population.

Authorities restricted consular visits to prisoners. Notification of relevant consulates in the cases of several dual national prisoners was delayed or did not occur. There were reports that authorities executed third country nationals before their embassies were notified of their arrest or conviction.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The Basic Law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and limits the period of arrest to 72 hours without charges being filed. The law provides for trial of the detained within six months. However, because of ambiguous implementation of the law and a lack of due process, the MOI maintained broad powers to arbitrarily arrest and detain persons indefinitely without judicial oversight or effective access to legal counsel or family. In practice, persons were held for weeks or months and sometimes longer.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The king, the minister of interior, the minister of defense, and the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) commander all have responsibility in law and in practice for law enforcement and maintenance of order. King Abdullah remained in command of the SANG. Crown Prince Sultan, the minister of defense and aviation, had responsibility for all of that ministry's armed forces. The minister of interior, Prince Nayef, exercised control over government internal security forces, the internal security police, the Directorate of General Investigation (Mabahith), the Special Security Forces, the Special Emergency Forces, the Public Security Forces, the Highway Patrol, the Facilities Security Forces, customs, the General Administration of Narcotics Control, the coast guard, and the border guard. The General Intelligence Presidency (GIP), reporting directly to the king, is the government's primary external intelligence agency and maintained its own forces. The civil police and the internal security police are authorized to arrest and detain individuals. Security forces were generally effective at maintaining law and order; however, there was a perception that small-scale corruption occurred among security forces and a perception that security forces acted with impunity. The Board of Grievances was the only formalized mechanism available to investigate claims of abuse. Citizens can report abuses by security forces at any police station, to the governmental HRC, and to the NSHR; however, no information was available on the number of complaints filed or the results.

The CPVPV constitutes a semiautonomous agency that reports to the king via the Royal Diwan (royal court). The MOI also has an undefined and mostly unenforced oversight role over the religious police. The religious police monitor public behavior to enforce strict adherence to conservative Islamic norms.

Arrest and Detention

According to the criminal procedure legislation, "no person shall be arrested, searched, detained, or imprisoned except in cases provided by law, and any accused person shall have the right to seek the assistance of a lawyer or a representative to defend him during the investigation and trial stages." Any person can be summoned to be investigated, and an arrest warrant can be issued based on sufficient evidence; however, warrants were not required in cases of probable cause and sometimes were not used. Warrants were required for searches of

inhabited dwellings and seizures of items resulting from such searches. Regulations provide bail for less serious crimes, although authorities sometimes released detainees on the recognizance of a patron or sponsoring employer without payment of bail. There were no established procedures providing detainees the right to contact family members following arrest. There were no established procedures providing for appeal of deportation.

There were reports of arbitrary arrest and pretrial detention. Although the law prohibits detention without charge, authorities detained without charge security suspects, persons who publicly criticized the government, Shia religious leaders, and others who violated religious standards.

Security suspects arrested by the internal security police were held incommunicado in special prisons during the initial phase of the investigation, which may last indefinitely under the MOI's broad legal authority. Authorities restricted access to detainees by family or lawyers.

The number of detainees was not known at year's end. In October detainees held indefinitely awaiting trial included at least 720 suspects. A September 8 AI submission to the UN Human Rights Council cited the minister of interior in July 2007 confirming that 3,016 security suspects were in detention at that time. According to an October 3 HRW report, in November 2007 authorities released 1,500 suspected militants after a reeducation program in prison. They had been detained without charge or trial.

In 2007 the NSHR reported that some police officers detained individuals with no justifiable cause and abused their authority by threatening to detain individuals to pressure them to obtain confessions or information relevant to an investigation.

The religious police are required to have a police officer accompany them at the time of an arrest. However, there were some cases in which religious police detained persons without the presence of a police officer. Particularly in the more conservative Nejd region, religious police accosted, abused, arrested, and detained citizens and noncitizens, especially women, for allegedly violating dress and behavior standards.

On September 21, the Saudi Gazette newspaper reported that the chief of the CPVPV, Sheikh Ibrahim al-Ghaith, barred the commission's agents from checking the family sections of restaurants or hotels without first obtaining his permission.

The religious police continued to monitor public behavior. For example, in February CPVPV arrested and jailed a foreign businesswoman for being present in public with a male who was not her relative. Authorities released her the following day.

In February 2007, according to HRW, internal security police in Jeddah and Medina arrested Isam Basrawi, his assistant, and eight other men, all of whom were prominent reform advocates. Basrawi was reportedly released for health reasons in September 2007, although the others remained in prison at year's end. They have not been charged; however, there were allegations in the media that they financed terrorism outside the country. In November the group and several outside supporters organized a two-day hunger strike to protest their ongoing detention.

Authorities continued to hold without charge Jordanian citizen Tariq Yunis, who was arrested in January 2007 as part of a contractual dispute. An agent for Princess Basma bint Sa'ud bin Abd Al-'Aziz Al-Sa'ud brought a civil case against Yunis alleging that Yunis owed the princess money.

Amnesty

During the year the government continued its tradition of pardoning or granting amnesty on special occasions, including holy days and during Ramadan. For example, the Saudi Gazette reported that the king pardoned 102 prisoners in the Asir and Eastern Province regions on September 5.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Basic Law provides for an independent judiciary, but one that cooperates with the executive and legislative authorities, with the king as arbiter. Allegations of interference with judicial independence were uncommon. The courts have not attempted to exercise jurisdiction over senior members of the royal family. The Supreme Judicial Council, whose members are appointed by the king, appoints, transfers, and removes judges. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) disciplines judges. The MOJ judicial system is Shari'a-based, whereas specialized tribunals in the executive branch decide many civil disputes relying on regulatory/legislative precepts and refrain from ruling on matters Islamic jurisprudence clearly addresses.

The legal system is based on the government's interpretation of Shari'a in all general courts. Ordinary, or summary, courts exercise jurisdiction over common criminal cases and rely on interpretation of the Koran rather than a penal code in civil suits regarding marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Their jurisdiction extends to non-Muslims for crimes committed in the country. Judgments from these courts can be appealed to two appellate courts located in Riyadh and Mecca. The third and final level is the Supreme Judicial Council, which has 11 members, supervises the work of the lower courts, and expresses legal opinions on judicial questions. The council cannot reverse decisions made by the courts of appeal; however, the council can review lower court decisions and affirm or remand them for reconsideration.

The Ministry of Trade generally adjudicates commercial disputes, but occasionally Shari'a courts try commercial cases with the assistance of an advisory panel. The Ministry of Labor handles all labor disputes through the Commission for the Settlement of Labor Disputes. Other similar bodies deal with monetary issues, traffic, and customs.

Other civil proceedings, such as those involving claims against the government and enforcement of foreign judgments, are held before various specialized administrative tribunals. The Board of Grievances serves directly under the king and is roughly comparable to administrative courts and hears complaints against government actions including against the religious police. Noncitizens have occasionally won their cases against government actions in these tribunals.

Shari'a is not based on a system of precedent, which can result in widely divergent rulings and has led to complaints that judges have acted capriciously. According to the MOJ, judges are free to base their decisions on any of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence. In practice judges usually follow the Hanbali school of jurisprudence.

The government permitted Shia citizens to use their own Jaafari legal tradition to adjudicate cases involving domestic issues, inheritance, and Islamic endowments. The Jaafari system, with jurisdiction over cases in the Al-Ahsa/Qatif area only, consisted of two basic courts, each with two judges in Qatif and Al-Ahsa and a three-judge appeals court in Qatif. The Jaafari courts, however, have limited power. For example, if a litigant disagreed with the Shia court's decision, that person could seek a rehearing in a Sunni court, which could overrule any previous determination.

The military justice system has jurisdiction over uniformed personnel and civil servants who are charged with violations of military regulations. The defense minister and the king review the decisions of military tribunals. Security courts are established within the existing court system and are overseen by Shari'a judges.

The Council of Senior Religious Scholars (Ulema) is an autonomous advisory body of 21 senior religious jurists, including the minister of justice. It interprets Shari'a and establishes the legal principles that guide lower court judges.

Trial Procedures

Laws and regulations state that defendants should be treated equally in accordance with Shari'a. The law does not require a public trial, and the majority of trials were closed. Whether to open a trial to the public is at the discretion of the judge. Many cases, including capital cases, proceed through trial to verdict and sentencing with no public notice, unless the verdict is reported in the media.

According to the Criminal Procedure Law, defendants do not enjoy a presumption of innocence. The law provides persons under investigation the right to a lawyer and permits lawyers to present arguments in criminal courts; however, an attorney is not provided at public expense if the defendant cannot afford to hire one. The law does not specifically protect a defendant's right to consult with an attorney upon arrest. The law provides for defendants to have access to relevant government-held evidence, and convicted persons are to be informed of their right to appeal rulings. Defendants also have the right to confront or question witnesses against them; however, witnesses are questioned before the initiation of a trial and not during the trial. Juries are not used.

Shari'a discriminates against criminal defendants and civil litigants on the basis of religion and gender, which can affect the admissibility and weight of evidence, and thus the outcome of legal proceedings.

In a Shari'a court, the testimony of one man equals that of two women. Under the government's interpretation of Shari'a, judges may discount the testimony of persons who are nonpracticing Sunni Muslims, including Shia Muslims. Sources reported that testimony by Shia was often ignored in courts of law or was deemed to have less weight than testimony by Sunnis.

Female parties in court proceedings such as divorce and family law cases generally had to deputize male relatives to speak on their behalf. In the absence of two witnesses, or four witnesses in the case of adultery, confessions before a judge were almost always required for criminal conviction.

Sentencing is not always uniform. In wrongful death cases, the amount of indemnity or "blood money" awarded to relatives has varied with the nationality, religion, age, and gender of the victim. A sentence may be changed at any stage of review, except for punishments stipulated by the Koran.

Provincial governors and senior officials have authority to reduce a sentence. In cases between two individuals, the wronged party has the right to accept money or impose no punishment instead of the punishment decreed by the judge.

The king and his advisors review cases involving capital punishment. The king has the authority to commute death sentences and grant pardons, except for capital crimes committed against individuals. In such cases, he may request the victim's next of kin pardon the killer--usually in return for compensation from the family of the convicted person or from the king.

In June 2007 Sri Lankan domestic worker Rizana Nafeek faced execution after being found guilty of murdering an infant in her care. Nafeek had no legal representation. In addition, because she was allegedly provided forged documents in Sri Lanka, she may have been 17 at the time. An appeals hearing revealed that an interpreter may not have been qualified. The infant's family has continuously refused to consider clemency. The appeal of Nafeek's death sentence was pending at year's end.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

On May 19, security forces arrested Professor Matrouk al-Faleh at King Saud University. On May 17, he had posted on a Web site a three-page criticism of the justice system, including conditions in Buraida Prison following a visit to detained reformers Isa and Abdullah al-Hamid. Al-Faleh remained in prison without charge at year's end. According to HRW, the government did not permit his lawyers or international humanitarian organizations access to him.

On July 8, authorities released Isa al-Hamid. His brother, Abdullah al-Hamid, was released on August 28. According to press reports, in July 2007 the internal security police arrested the two prominent reformers for instigating a public demonstration during which women peacefully protested the continued detention of relatives without charge or trial. HRW reported that a court in Buraida sentenced the al-Hamid brothers to four and six month prison terms, respectively, in November 2007.

According to HRW, Mansur al-'Awdha, a reform activist from Jawf, has been in al-Ha'ir prison without charge since December 2007.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The Board of Grievances, reporting to the king, considers cases in which a government agency is a party. There were no reports of human rights cases presented to the board during the year.

There were also no reports of lawsuits seeking damages for, or cessation of, human rights violations. Instead, complainants generally referred their cases to the HRC, which either advocated on their behalf or provided courts with opinions on their cases. Domestic violence cases were the most common. The HRC was generally responsive to complaints. Administrative and judicial remedies were available for alleged violations.

Individuals with complaints against police or security forces could file a complaint with their governorate office, which logged complaints and performed investigations. Some investigations reportedly resulted in the discipline or dismissal of police.

Shari'a discriminates against non-Muslims and women in calculating accidental death or injury compensation. According to the prevailing Hanbali interpretation of Shari'a, once a court determines fault, a Muslim male receives 100 percent of the amount of compensation determined, a Jew or Christian male receives 50 percent, and all others, including "polytheists," receive one sixteenth of the amount a Muslim male receives. Women receive 50 percent of what men receive in each of these categories.

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

The Basic Law guarantees the inviolability of homes and the privacy of correspondence. The Criminal Procedure Law requires authorities to obtain a warrant prior to searching a residence or a court order prior to perusing personal correspondence and documents. Royal decrees include provisions for the government to defend the home from unlawful intrusions, and laws and regulations prohibit officials from intercepting mail and electronic communications except when necessary during internal security and criminal investigations; in such cases the police must demonstrate reasonable cause and obtain permission from a provincial governor. The government generally respected this inviolability, but there were some cases in which the government infringed on these rights, such as religious police raids on private residences.

Despite these legal provisions, customs officials routinely opened mail and shipments to search for contraband, including material deemed pornographic or that appeared to be non Sunni Islamic religious material. In some areas,

informants reported "seditious ideas," antigovernment activity, or "behavior contrary to Islam" in their neighborhoods to the MOI.

Religious police enforcement of strict standards of social behavior included closing commercial establishments during the five daily prayer observances, insisting upon compliance with strict norms of public dress, and dispersing gatherings of women in public places designated for men, as well as preventing unaccompanied men from entering public places designated for families. Religious police frequently reproached both citizen and foreign women for failure to observe strict dress codes and arrested men and women found together who were not married or closely related. Since there are no clear standards for what constitutes improper attire or prohibited gender mixing, enforcement of these rules is arbitrary and subject to the personal views of CPVPV field officers.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Basic Law does not provide for freedom of speech or the press, and the government generally did not respect these rights in practice. Several major media outlets were owned by members of the royal family, and individuals were not permitted to criticize the royal family publicly. The government actively impeded criticism and monitored citizens' political activity. In rare cases, individuals criticized specific government bodies or actions publicly without repercussions.

According to the Basic Law, the media's role is to educate the masses and promote national unity. Media outlets can legally be banned or publication temporarily halted if they are deemed to promote "mischief and discord, compromise the security of the state and its public image," or if it "offends a man's dignity and rights." The government continued to restrict freedom of speech and press by interrupting publication and dissemination of news sources critical of the royal family or of Islam. Authorities prevented or delayed distribution of foreign print media, effectively censoring these media and publications. During the year media discussions took place that tested the boundaries of permissible topics for media coverage, including political and social reforms, actions of government ministries, domestic and child abuse, rights of women and human rights, corruption, drug and alcohol abuse, crime rates and violence, trafficking in persons, HIV/AIDS, and the religious police.

The government continued to enforce existing laws based on Article 12 of the Basic Law, which provides the state with the authority to "prevent anything that may lead to disunity, sedition, and separation." All public employees are enjoined from "participating, directly or indirectly, in the preparation of any document, speech or petition; engaging in dialogue with local and foreign media; or participating in any meetings intended to oppose the state's policies."

An unwritten yet routinely followed media policy prohibits the dissemination of criticism of the royal family and the government. In this regard, the print media exercised self-censorship. Some newspapers have close ties to members of the royal family, including widely circulated pan-Arab newspapers Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat and Al-Hayat, which members of the royal family own. A 1982 government media policy statement still in effect urges journalists to uphold Islam, oppose atheism, promote Arab interests, and preserve cultural heritage. The Ministry of Culture and Information (MCI) must approve the appointment of all senior editors and has the authority to remove them. The government provides guidelines to newspapers regarding controversial issues. The government owned Saudi Press Agency (SPA) reports on official government news. All newspapers in the country must be licensed by the government.

From March to June the press extensively covered the March deaths of six citizens allegedly caused by members of the religious police during high-speed car chases. The deaths resulted in significant criticism both in the print press

and in online fora, and the media called for investigations and accountability regarding the accidents. Authorities cleared and released members of the religious police after investigations.

On July 7, Al-Riyadh newspaper reported the arrest of a Saudi judge in Dubai on drug possession and use charges. The MOJ stated the man was not a judge; however, Al-Riyadh published a confirmation by its sources that the man was a Saudi judge.

In June Prince Faisal bin Abdullah, the president of the Saudi Red Crescent Society and a son of the king, filed a defamation lawsuit against Al-Watan journalist Saleh al-Shehy within the established grievance process set up by the MCI. There was no conclusion by year's end.

In August 2007 the MCI halted distribution of Al-Hayat newspaper, based either on what media reports claimed was the ministry's disapproval of Al-Hayat's "Western style" format and criticism on local issues or an implied link between respected religious scholars and terrorism.

The Saudi Journalist Association operates under a government charter. Membership is voluntary and open to both men and women. Although theoretically noncitizen journalists working in the country were eligible to join, they have no voting rights, and may not attend the association's general assembly. The organization's elected nine-member board of directors includes two women, all approved by the MCI.

During the year access to information and government statistics improved incrementally but remained limited. Access to information related to the government's budget and accountability of public officials improved. The government owned and operated most domestic television and radio channels. In domestic broadcast programs, government censors removed references to religions other than Islam, pork or pigs, alcohol, and sex. Private, Saudi-owned satellite networks such as the MBC, Orbit, and ART media groups, although headquartered outside of the country, maintained local offices and operated under a system of self-censorship. Many other foreign satellite stations broadcast a wide range of programs into the country.

Approximately 30 radio stations continued to await operating licenses during the year, although several new independent newspapers began operations.

Although they were technically illegal, the government did not place restrictions on several million satellite receiving dishes that provided citizens with foreign television programming. Access to outside sources of information, such as Arabic and Western satellite television channels and the Internet, was widespread. The government did not censor foreign television programming. Royal or affluent merchant families owned most of the media companies that brought foreign television programming to the country via satellite.

Journalists occasionally faced harassment and intimidation via phone calls or e-mails; however, there were no reports of violent harassment of journalists during the year.

In March according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Sheikh Abdul-Rahman al-Barrak, a Saudi cleric, called for the trial of two writers for their "heretical articles" and their deaths if they did not repent. In September the head of the Supreme Judicial Council, Sheikh Saleh al-Lihedan, stated during a radio program that it is permissible under Shari'a to kill owners of satellite television channels that broadcast immoral content. Following strong domestic and international reaction, al-Lihedan clarified his remarks to state that media owners could be subject to the judicial process, including the death penalty.

Media reports noted Al-Ekhbariya TV, a government-run news channel, suspended one of its presenters and temporarily discontinued live broadcasts because the presenter allowed negative comments about a governmental

policy to air. The channel later reinstated the presenter. The MCI facilitated the opening of Al-Jazeera Arabic and Associated Press bureaus in Riyadh. At year's end both media outlets could file and broadcast from within the country.

The Consultative Council allowed the media, both print and broadcast, to observe its proceedings and meetings, but the council closed certain high-profile or controversial sessions to the media.

In June 2007, according to AI, university professor Sa'id Bin Zu'air was arrested on charges of financially aiding terrorists; other sources have argued that he may have been arrested to prevent him from appearing on Al-Jazeera and criticizing the government. He remained in detention at year's end.

Internet Freedom

The government restricted access to the Internet, and the Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC) reportedly monitors e mail and Internet chat rooms. During the year more citizens appeared to engage in exchanges of views and information via the Internet, including e-mail and blogs. The government continued to block access to Web sites it deemed sexual, pornographic, politically sensitive, offensive to the government or members of the royal family, "un Islamic," or disruptive because of controversial religious content. In October, for example, the STC blocked access to the Voice of Saudi Women Web site for material it deemed in opposition to government policy.

According to the International Telecommunications Union, in 2007 there were approximately 1.8 million Internet subscribers and 6.38 million users. By law access to the Internet was available only through local government monitored servers. In practice the law was not enforced, as some citizens openly circumvented controls by accessing the Internet through servers in other countries via satellite. The government continued to streamline the process for citizens to request that a site become unblocked. Authorities reported requests have resulted in unblocking certain Web sites. Authorities routinely blocked sites carrying content the government considered to violate religious norms or to be extremist and anti-government. Most social networking tools such as Facebook were not blocked. The Google social network Orkut remained blocked throughout the year.

The law criminalizes defamation on the Internet, hacking, unauthorized access to government Web sites, and stealing information related to national security. At year's end there were no reported prosecutions; however, authorities did arbitrarily arrest and detain some bloggers posting content the government found objectionable.

On April 26, authorities released from detention Fouad Ahmed al-Farhan, a popular blogger and owner of proreform Web site Alfarhan.org. Authorities had arrested him in December 2007 and issued no formal charges. Online and print media reports quoted a MOI official stating his arrest was due to "mistakes he committed."

On May 5, a prosecutor charged Rai'f Badawi in absentia with "setting up an electronic site that insults Islam," and asked for a sentence of five years in prison and a fine of three million riyals (approximately \$800,000). According to HRW, Badawi used the site to track abuses by the religious police and question the dominant interpretation of Islam. Badawi sold the Web site and fled the country prior to the charge. In March authorities detained and interrogated Badawi about the Web site for one day.

On November 4, self-identified members of the CPVPV detained poet/blogger Roshdi Algadir in Dammam for "writing poetry with quotations from a book of sorcery and blasphemy." The individuals briefly detained the poet, beat him, and forced him to sign an agreement promising he would not publish his work on the Internet.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government continued to restrict academic freedom. The government prohibited the study of evolution, Freud, Marx, Western music, and Western philosophy. Informants reportedly monitored classroom comments and reported to the government and religious authorities. Academics practiced self-censorship.

In contrast to previous years, several books dealing with taboo subjects such as religious diversity and philosophy were displayed and sold at the Riyadh International Book Fair. Women were permitted to work as book vendors, and the Japanese, French and American booths included female staff during both family and men-only days. However, female visitors were not permitted to approach male authors during book signings, and female writers did not enjoy the same opportunities to sign their works in public. Religious police present during the fair were required to wear identity badges.

Educational exhibitions in Qatif prohibited female participation. For the past two years, the Qatif Educational Fair has been unable to secure government approval for female participation or for a parallel female only educational fair.

The government censored public artistic expression and prohibited cinemas and public musical or theatrical performances, except those considered folkloric. According to media reports, 12 men suspected of links to the religious police disrupted Riyadh's official spring cultural festival—which featured plays for men and theater and movies for children—by destroying exhibits and approaching visitors who were allegedly violating CPVPV rules. Taif's Okaz Cultural Festival also came under criticism by conservatives for promoting "un-Islamic and pagan tradition," but senior officials and academics publicly defended the government-sponsored festival.

Cultural and recreational gatherings sponsored by private citizens continued, although the organizer cancelled a women's basketball tournament in Jeddah following a series of telephone threats, allegedly from the religious police. The Jeddah Literary Club welcomed a visiting delegation of writers from the University of Iowa, and the Riyadh Literary Club hosted the group for a discussion that was open to the public. Local authorities continued to force closings or social fora in the majority Shia Al-Ahsa region of Hofuf.

The government temporarily lifted a restriction on the public showing of films with the screening of a movie in Jeddah and Taif in December. Many international and local films were privately screened during the third annual Jeddah Film festival in July. On May 20, the minister of culture and information opened the country's first official film contest in the city of Dammam. The contest lasted four days and all 33 competing films were produced by citizens.

The Riyadh religious police arrested a television crew for allegedly filming during prayer times.

Public performance of plays and music were allowed if they were traditional and part of a special event. A foreign embassy sponsored a classical concert for a mixed-gender audience in Riyadh. In addition public art exhibitions by male and female artists at hotels, malls, and open galleries were held throughout Jeddah, largely under royal patronage. Another exhibit by a female artist was held in Al-Rashid Mall in Al-Khobar.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The Basic Law does not address freedom of assembly, which the government strictly limited in practice. Public demonstrations were prohibited.

Public meetings were usually segregated by gender. However, the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry

(JCCI) and other commercial and medical gatherings were frequently mixed gender. At media press conferences, female journalists may be restricted to front-row seats rather than provided a separate room with closed-circuit television. The authorities monitored large nonfamily gatherings, particularly if women were present. The religious police dispersed any large nonfamily groups in public places, such as restaurants. However, men and women could mix in some public places that cater to noncitizens.

Authorities arrested at least 12 participants following a demonstration in support of Gazan Palestinians in the Shia-majority city of Qatif, Eastern Province. On December 29, police dispersed a similar demonstration in Qatif, again arresting participants in the subsequent days. However, police did not disrupt another similar demonstration December 29 in Safwa, Eastern Province.

On December 31, the MOI, citing security concerns, denied a request by activists to hold a peaceful sit-in in Riyadh on behalf of Palestinians in Gaza.

In July 2007 police arrested five women after they held a sit in outside a prison to advocate for timely trials for relatives who had been imprisoned. There were no government-permitted peaceful political demonstrations during the year.

Freedom of Association

The Basic Law does not address freedom of association, and the government strictly limited this right in practice.

The government prohibited the establishment of political parties or any group it considered as opposing the regime or possibly overstepping the bounds of criticism by challenging the king's authority. All associations must be licensed by the MOI and comply with its rules and regulations; however, previous requests for licensing from citizens have gone unanswered.

For example, human rights activist Ibrahim al-Mugaiteeb and his group Human Rights First Society (HRFS) applied for a license in 2002. Despite its continued activity, to date the group has received no response to this request. As the group is formally "unlicensed," it remained unclear which group activities were permitted and which could draw criticism or punishment from the government. Further, without a license the group may not raise operating funds, which severely limited its activities. The government took no steps to license HRFS during the year but permitted its informal operation.

In September 2007 a group calling itself the Association for the Protection and Defense of Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia transmitted to the king a petition with 1,100 signatures asking for a repeal of the ban on women driving. At year's end the government had not replied. According to HRW, the group received a warning against mounting any demonstrations. The association did not have legal status at year's end.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Basic Law states that Islam is the official religion. All citizens are expected to adhere to Islamic principles. The legal system is based on the government sanctioned version of Shari'a. Conversion by a Muslim to another religion is considered apostasy, and persons accused of apostasy face physical abuse and threats of execution unless they recant. There have been no confirmed reports of sanctioned executions for apostasy since 1992, but in the late 1990's there were reports of prisoners who were beaten to death by government authorities for refusing to recant their alleged apostasy.

There is no legal recognition or protection of religious freedom, and it was severely restricted in practice. The

government limited the practice of all but the officially sanctioned version of Islam, limiting the public practice of Muslim sects other than Sunni Islam and prohibiting the public practice of, profession of, or possession of literature and symbols relating to other religions. The government stated that as a matter of public policy it protects the right to private worship for all, including non Muslims who gather in homes for religious services. This right was not always respected in practice and is not defined by law.

The public practice of non Muslim religions is prohibited. Although the government stated its policy to protect the right to possess and use personal religious materials, it did not provide for this right by law.

In contrast to similar incidents in recent years, the government reversed its decision to deport foreign Christians arrested for conducting a worship service in incidents in April in the Western Province and in May in Qassim Province.

In June there were reports from Al-Khobar that authorities closed three Shia mosques that had been operating for years. Sunni mosques continued to operate freely and without government harassment.

The law criminalizes blasphemy. On March 31, a court sentenced Sabri Bogday, a Turkish barber, to death after two men reported to the authorities that he blasphemed God and the Prophet Muhammad in his barbershop. On May 1, an appellate court upheld his conviction of blasphemy. At year's end the sentence had not been carried out.

Citizens and especially foreigners were occasionally accused of believing in or practicing "magic," "superstition," and "sorcery." Under the government's interpretation of Shari'a, magic was regarded as one of the worst forms of polytheism, and is a capital offense. Unlike the previous year, there were no reports of executions of individuals convicted of magic.

In February HRW appealed to the king to stop the execution of Fawza Falih Muhammad Ali, who was arrested in 2005 and accused of witchcraft. There was reportedly weak evidence and the court followed highly irregular procedures. Her case was transferred to the Royal Court in January. At year's end she remained imprisoned and in poor mental health. In November 2007 police officers in Taif arrested a Nigerian woman for alleged witchcraft. No further information was available concerning either case at year's end.

In October the press reported that an appeals court confirmed the sentence of a Sudanese "sorceress" to three years' imprisonment, 1,500 lashes, and deportation.

During the year there were fewer reports of government officials confiscating religious materials and no reports that customs officials confiscated religious materials from travelers, whether Muslims or non-Muslims. Individuals were able to bring personal Bibles, crosses, DVDs of sermons, and other religious materials into the country without difficulty.

There were fewer reported religious police raids on religious gatherings in the Western Hijaz region and in the Eastern Province. In addition there were reports of large public and private celebrations of Shia holidays in Qatif. Government restrictions on celebration of Shia holidays differed by region.

For example, the January Ashura holiday in Qatif was marked by a greater number of commemorations and participants than in past years and less security presence. In addition there was wider practice of ritual self-flagellation, a practice the government had previously sought to discourage.

In contrast, in other areas with large Shia populations such as al-Ahsa and Dammam, authorities continued to restrict Shia religious practices. The government imposed restrictions on public observances of Ashura in these and

other areas where both Shia and Sunni live. Authorities banned public marches, loudspeaker broadcasts of clerics' lectures from Shia community centers, and in some instances, gatherings within the centers. There were reports that these measures were applied strongly in al-Ahsa, where the local governor allegedly gathered approximately 30 Shia community leaders two weeks before the Ashura celebration to warn them against public celebrations. It was not clear if this action was expressly anti-Shia or designed to prevent conflict in mixed areas. In addition, security forces patrolled the streets of al-Ahsa to ensure that there were no banners or flags, which are associated with the religious holiday.

In February the government reportedly prohibited the public celebration of the Shia Arbaeen religious holiday in all areas except the majority Shia area in Qatif.

On June 22, authorities arrested a prominent Shia sheikh in al-Ahsa after he called a previous anti-Shia statement by 22 Salafi clerics an incitement to violence and demanded greater rights and political representation for the Shia of al-Ahsa. Authorities detained the sheikh for one week.

On October 13, the Web site Al-Rasid reported that authorities arrested Shia rights activist Farid al-Nemer as he returned from Bahrain. He was allegedly arrested and detained for five or six days for his antigovernment and pro-Shia activities.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA) took measures to reduce extremist rhetoric in sermons. On February 22, Okaz newspaper reported that the MOIA appointed 1,500 people to monitor sermons in mosques and the activities of imams across the country. According to the article, a leading MOIA official fired some imams due to violations of MOIA regulations. On April 28, Al-Watan reported that the Jeddah branch of the MOIA had summoned a number of imams and khateeb (those who deliver a sermon during Friday prayer) for questioning related to their deviation from MOIA directions intended to prevent the preaching of extremist ideologies.

On October 17, the Saudi Gazette reported that Minister of Islamic Affairs Sheikh Saleh Bin Abdul Aziz Al-Sheikh stated that imams were free to address modern issues in their sermons but within limits. He stated that imams are not permitted to defame countries, people, or organizations, and that imams have the role of correcting misconceptions and counteracting deviant thought.

The government did not officially permit non Muslim clergy to enter the country for the purpose of conducting religious services, although some did enter under other auspices, and the government generally did not disrupt discreet religious functions. Such restrictions made it difficult for most non Muslims to maintain contact with clergymen and attend services but did not prevent them from gathering to practice their faith. Proselytizing by non Muslims, including the distribution of non Islamic religious materials such as Bibles, was illegal. Anyone wearing religious symbols in public that were considered idolatrous within the Hanbali school risked confrontation with the religious police.

Islamic religious education was mandatory in public schools at all levels. Regardless of the Islamic tradition to which their families adhere, all public school children receive religious instruction that conforms to the conservative Hanbali tradition of Sunni Islam. Expatriate non Muslim students in private schools were not required to study Islam. There was inconsistent enforcement of the law that imposes quotas on attendance of non-Saudi Muslim children at international schools in the country (other than their national community schools).

In contrast to the previous year, there were no reports that religious police pressured employers and sponsors to reach verbal agreements with non Muslim employees that they would not participate in private or public non Muslim worship services.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The government continued to enforce the Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam. Adherents of Shia Islam faced significant political, economic, legal, social, and religious discrimination condoned by the government, including limited employment and education opportunities and underrepresentation in official institutions. There were also restrictions on the practice of their faith and on the building of places of worship and community centers.

The Shia Muslim minority, estimated to be between 8 and 10 percent of the citizen population, lived mostly in the Eastern Province, although a significant number resided in the Western Province and in Najran in the southwest. The local government in the Najran area subjected members of the Sulaiman Ismaili minority (a branch of Shia Islam) to officially sanctioned discrimination in employment, the justice system, and the ability to practice their religion freely.

At year's end Hadi al-Mutif, a Sulaimani Ismaili Shia, remained imprisoned under a 1996 death sentence for "insulting the Prophet Muhammad." Then-King Fahd stayed the death sentence and King Abdullah upheld the stay; however, al-Mutif has remained in prison and has faced periods of solitary confinement following suicide attempts.

While they constituted approximately 40 percent of the Eastern Province population, there were only three Shia among the 150 members of the Consultative Council, the royally appointed body that advises the king, initiates legislation, and reviews and comments on policies as requested.

On January 25, the Al-Rasid Web site reported that extremists distributed leaflets in the Eastern Province before Ashura accusing the Shia of plotting to demolish the Grand Mosque in Mecca, remove the Kaaba and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, and annihilate all Muslims except the rafidah, a branch of Shia Muslims.

On September 7, police arrested Shia religious leader Shaikh Tawfik al-Amer for performing prayers according to Shia practice. Authorities released him after 11 days in detention. According to NGO reports, police also arrested al-Amer in June for criticizing a statement signed by 22 Sunni clerics that described Shia as enemies of Sunnis.

There were no public places of worship for non Muslims. Although significant numbers of Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and a few Jews resided in the country, no public churches, temples, or synagogues were allowed. There were reports of violence against and harassment of Christians, due to societal discrimination against foreign workers coupled with religious discrimination.

The government required noncitizens to carry legal resident identity cards that contained a religious designation for "Muslim" or "non Muslim." Unlike in previous years, there were no reports that some sponsors withheld pay and residency card renewal based on religious factors.

There were reports that religious vigilantes, unaffiliated with the CPVPV and acting on their own, harassed and assaulted citizens and foreigners.

On infrequent occasions, editorial cartoons exhibited anti-Semitism characterized by stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols and comparisons of Israeli government actions to those of the Nazis. Anti Semitic editorial comments sometimes appeared in the government and private print and electronic media in response to regional political events.

There continued to be instances in which Sunni imams, who receive government stipends, used anti-Jewish, anti-Christian, and anti-Shia language in their sermons and some instances in which mosque speakers prayed for the death of Jews and Christians, including from the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.

There were reports the MOIA dismissed some imams for espousing intolerant ideas, but other imams who made such statements were allowed to continue. There were reports of imams in the Eastern Province who included calls for divine punishment of Jews as part of special prayers.

Since 2001 the government has claimed it has projects under way to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to promote tolerance and remove content disparaging religions other than Islam. Despite its most recent effort begun in 2006, elementary and secondary education textbooks still retained some language that was intolerant of other religious traditions, especially Jewish, Christian, and Shia beliefs, and in some cases provided justification for violence against non-Muslims.

For a more detailed discussion, see the 2008 International Religious Freedom Report at www.state.gov/g/drl/irf/rpt.

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

The Basic Law does not provide for these rights.

Freedom of movement was restricted. The government restricted this right for women based on its interpretation of Shari'a. With the exception of some rural areas where the restriction was not enforced, all women in the country were prohibited from driving. The government must issue an exit visa for an individual to leave the country. A male citizen younger than 21 requires the permission of his guardian to travel outside the country. Minor and single adult daughters of citizen fathers must obtain written permission from a male relative. A woman can obtain her own national photo identity card, although the government required permission from a male relative or guardian. A female citizen with a valid passport can obtain an identity card on the basis of her own passport; however, if a woman does not have a passport, she needs a male guardian to verify her identity. During the year the government continued to issue national identity cards to women, despite opposition by religious conservatives. There were reports that some women had difficulty obtaining identity cards.

If a husband refused to grant his noncitizen wife permission to travel, her choices were to divorce her husband or not to travel. If she divorced her husband, the government could issue her an exit visa, but she was unlikely to be allowed to reenter the country. In March the government instituted a prenuptial agreement for marriages in which the wife is a noncitizen. Both partners must sign an agreement that permits the noncitizen wife to travel without the husband's permission. The law is not retroactive.

Females and minor children, even those with dual nationality, may also be subject to "blacklisting" by government entities or family members wishing to prohibit their travel. A January royal decree gave women the right to check into hotels without a male guardian. In cases involving custody disputes of citizens or resident noncitizens, the male guardian is legally able to prevent the travel of his spouse and his minor and adult children out of the country.

The Basic Law prohibits employers from retaining foreign workers' passports; in practice, most sponsors reportedly disregarded the law and retained possession of foreign employees' passports. Foreign workers must obtain permission from their sponsors to travel abroad. Sponsors involved in a commercial or labor dispute with foreign employees could ask the authorities to prohibit the employees from departing the country until the dispute was resolved. In some contract disputes, sponsors used this leverage to force employees to accept disadvantageous settlements or be deported. Foreigners were allowed to reside or work in the country only under the sponsorship of a citizen or business. The law did not permit foreigners to change their workplace without their sponsor's permission.

The government seized the passports of all potential suspects and witnesses in criminal cases and suspended the issuance of exit visas to these individuals until the case was concluded. As a result, some foreign nationals were

forced to remain in the country for lengthy periods against their will.

The government did not use forced exile, but it has previously revoked the citizenship of opponents of the government who resided outside the country.

Citizens may emigrate. The government prohibited dual citizenship; however, only children who held other citizenship by virtue of birth abroad were permitted to leave the country using noncitizen passports. A 2005 citizenship law allows certain long term residents and other foreigners to obtain citizenship.

The government continued to impose travel bans on some reformers. Authorities sometimes confiscated passports of suspected opposition members and their families. In addition the government revoked the rights of some citizens to travel outside the country for political reasons without notifying the individual or providing opportunities to contest the restriction.

In December authorities stopped previously detained blogger Fouad al-Farhan in the Jeddah airport and prevented him from leaving the country to speak at the third annual Arab Free Press Forum.

Authorities have banned Abdulrahman al-Lahem, the lawyer for the female victim in the 2006 Qatif rape, from travel abroad since 2004. During the year the government prevented him from traveling abroad to receive two prestigious human rights awards. The travel ban was scheduled to expire in March 2009. In November 2007 authorities suspended and confiscated his license to practice because of his attempts to publicize the rape case. His license was reinstated during the year.

The NSHR reported in 2007 that some Shia activist writers and public figures have been stripped of their identity cards for as long as 15 years and denied any document proving their nationality because they had allegedly illegally acquired national identity. Some in this group had papers proving they had been serving in government posts for long periods. Others had their identity cards taken away.

Protection of Refugees

The Basic 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, but the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. In practice the government claimed to provide protection against refoulement, the forced return of persons to a country where there is reason to believe they feared persecution. The Basic Law provides that "the state will grant political asylum, if so required by the public interest."

The government provided temporary protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees under the 1951 convention and the 1967 protocol. Government policy is not to grant refugee status to persons who are in the country illegally, or who have overstayed a pilgrimage visa.

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees and asylum-seekers.

The UNHCR Representative Office to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries reported that as of July, 57 Iraqi refugees remained in the country. The Rafa refugee camp was closed last year. According to a representative of the UNHCR, since 1991 the UNHCR has facilitated the resettlement of more than 25,000 Iraqi refugees to third countries.

During the year the UNHCR did not find any evidence of forcible repatriation. In September there were three cases

in which Chinese Muslim Uighurs awaiting resettlement were threatened with possible deportation.

Stateless Persons

UNHCR unofficially estimated that there were 70,000 stateless persons in the country, almost all of whom were native-born Arab residents known as Bidoon. As noncitizens, Bidoon were unable to obtain passports and had limited ability to travel abroad. During the year, the MOI, the NSHR, and the HRC for the first time announced their intent to study the Bidoon issue.

Bidoon include those whose ancestors failed to obtain nationality, such as descendants of nomadic tribes who were not counted among the native tribes during the reign of the country's founder, King Abdulaziz; descendants of foreign born fathers who arrived before citizenship was institutionalized; and rural migrants whose parents failed to register their births. Bidoon were denied employment and educational opportunities because of their lack of citizenship. Bidoon were among the poorest residents of the country due to their marginalized status. The Ministry of Education took steps to admit Bidoon children to school. The government issued resident permits to Bidoon for five-year periods.

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

Citizens did not have the right to change their government peacefully. The Basic Law states that the government is established on the principle of shura (consultation) and requires the king and crown prince to hold majlis meetings, open door events where in theory any male citizen or foreign national may express an opinion or a grievance. A prince or other important national or local official can also hold a majlis. The Basic Law states that all individuals have the right to communicate with public authorities on any issue. The government interpreted this as a right to be exercised within traditional nonpublic means, not through the use of mass media.

Elections and Political Participation

Under the family monarchy system enshrined in the Basic Law, only a few members of the ruling family have a voice in the choice of leaders, in the composition of the government, or in changing the political system. In 2006 the king issued a new succession law that amended the 1992 Basic Law and formalized the process by creating the Allegiance Commission that will select a king and crown prince upon the death or incapacitation of either. The Allegiance Commission is composed of all living sons and, for sons who are deceased, some grandsons of Abdulaziz bin Abd Al Rahman Al-Saud, the founder of the modern kingdom. This commission expands the role of the ruling family in the selection process.

The king serves as prime minister and his crown prince serves as deputy prime minister. The king appoints all other ministers, who appoint subordinate officials with cabinet concurrence.

Only male, nonmilitary citizens at least 21 years of age were eligible to vote in the nationwide 2005 elections for 592 seats on 178 municipal advisory councils (half the total seats). There were no independent election observers. Unofficial estimates were that between 10 and 15 percent of eligible voters actually voted. The king completed the formation of the councils in 2005 by appointing 592 men to fill the other half of the council seats.

The 1992 Basic Law also created the Consultative Council that reviews, votes on, and provides recommendations to the king on some legislation proposed by the ministries. The Consultative Council consists of 150 male members appointed to four-year terms in 2005 and is divided into 11 committees. The council has authority to initiate its own legislation, which is sent to the king for approval. The government generally accepted the council's proposed amendments. The council held hearings with some government officials to review the performance of their

ministries; all government ministers, including senior princes, were required to submit to hearings. Some but not all of the hearings were televised after the fact. The council has the power to request documents from government ministries. It has indirect and limited budget authority in that it must approve the spending priorities of different ministries. The council effectively blocked the imposition of new taxes.

The Supreme Ulema Council is another advisory body to the king and the cabinet. It reviews the government's public policies for compliance with Shari'a. The council is an important source of religious legitimacy for the government and royal family and the government generally responded to the Ulema's opinions on legislation and policy.

Communication between citizens and the government traditionally has been expressed through client patron relationships and by affinity groups such as tribes, families, and professional hierarchies. Ministers and district governors could be approached for discussion at their weekly open forum.

It was not legal to form political parties. The Green Party was the only political party that operated, and it did so illegally. In 2006 the Paris based group Saudi Democratic Opposition Front (SDOF) announced its formation and called for the peaceful overthrow of the monarchy. During the year the SDOF was not publicly active.

During the year and since 1992, various groups, including women and Shia, have submitted petitions calling for political reform. Women were not permitted to vote and did not sit in the cabinet or as judges. However, the government allowed women to run for positions on the board of the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, although none were elected. In 2007 two women were elected to the board of the JCCI. There were no women in the 150-member Consultative Council, in the cabinet, or on the Supreme Judicial Council. In 2006 the Consultative Council appointed six women as part time advisors on family and women's issues.

There were no religious minorities in the cabinet. Only three of the 150-member Consultative Council and some judges were Shia, although no laws prevent the participation of religious minorities in the government.

Government Corruption and Transparency

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption by employees. Employees who accept bribes face 10 years in prison or fines of as much as one million riyals (approximately \$267,000). However, corruption remained a problem and there was widespread public perception of corruption on the part of some members of the royal family and the executive branch of the government. The absence of transparency in government accounts and in decision-making encouraged this perception. Public officials were not subject to financial disclosure laws, and there were no laws providing public access to government information, including ministerial budgets. However, in contrast to previous years, information concerning specific instances of corruption, allegations regarding corruption, and government actions against corruption was publicly available within the country. The Consultative Council called ministers before it for questioning in exercise of its oversight responsibility.

The Prosecution and Investigation Commission, an independent body reporting to the Council of Ministers, investigated cases of corruption against public service officials. The commission considered 12,466 cases involving public service officials and agencies during the first half of the year. The commission identified instances of forgery, bribery, and public mistreatment, among others. During that same period, the Court of Grievances delivered 2,695 verdicts on criminal (1,368) and disciplinary cases against public officials and agencies.

On August 14, the Saudi Gazette reported that Minister of Health Hamed Al-Mane revealed an attempt by a private company to bribe a ministry employee. The employee reported the bribery attempt; authorities arrested the company representative and financially penalized the company.

On October 8, Arab News requested an investigation on corruption involving contracts for major road work, highlighting a project originally contracted for 698 million riyals (approximately \$186.1 million) that was subcontracted multiple times and ultimately performed for 18.2 million riyals (\$4.9 million).

In November a court in Taif ruled against 26 individuals, including 24 civil servants, accused of accepting bribes of approximately 100,000 riyals (\$27,000).

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

Government actions to protect human rights are guided by its interpretation of Shari'a. According to Article 26 of the Basic Law, "The State shall protect human rights in accordance with the Islamic Shari'a."

Two MOI-licensed domestic human rights institutions--the governmental HRC, founded in 2005, and the government-funded NSHR--operated in a restricted ambit and were reliant on government support. The one nonlicensed human rights group, HRFS, operated without legal status. In September 2007, according to HRW, a group of citizens presented a second request, following an initial one in 2003, to the minister of social affairs to register the "National Saudi Committee of Human Rights." There is no information on a government response.

The NSHR continued to receive requests for assistance and complaints about the government. Most of its members are academics, and two of its former members are ministers. Ten of its 41 members were women. The NSHR maintained offices in Jeddah, Dammam, Riyadh, and Jizan. The NSHR attempted to resolve cases by working with government agencies. The NSHR developed a booklet titled "Get to Know Your Rights," which was available in multiple languages. The booklet informs those accused of crimes of their rights under the law with respect to arrest, investigation, search, and trial. The government funded NSHR and accepted the group's advice and opinion but did not always act on its recommendations.

On September 3, the HRC announced the opening of a women's branch in Riyadh to look into human rights violations involving women and children. In October the HRC reported that the branch had handled 52 domestic violence cases. On September 9, the Arab News reported that the HRC handled more than 10,000 complaints in its first three years in existence.

During the year the HRC facilitated a visit by HRW to examine the conditions of expatriate laborers. HRW published a report of its findings critical of the country. HRW and AI on various occasions criticized the government and called on it to halt scheduled executions or highlighting the arrest and detention of activists. The government generally viewed international NGOs with suspicion. In October HRW formally requested permission to visit the country to observe trials of terror suspects; the request had not been granted by year's end.

From February 3 to 13, Yakin Erturk, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences, visited the country. Requests to visit the country by five different UN human rights special rapporteurs or working groups dating from 2005 remained unanswered at year's end.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on race but not nationality. Nevertheless, there were reports of racial discrimination against persons of non-Arab descent, especially persons of African descent. The prevailing interpretation of Shari'a institutionalizes discrimination based on gender, witnessed in application of inheritance and divorce laws and legal process, as well as in restricted educational and socioeconomic opportunities for women. The government and private organizations cooperated in providing services for persons with disabilities; however, there

is no legislation mandating public access. The Shia minority continued to suffer social, legal, economic, and political discrimination.

Women

Discrimination against women was a significant problem. For example, UN special representative Yakin Erturk, while acknowledging progress in the status of women, and particularly women's access to education, noted the lack of women's autonomy, freedom of movement, and economic independence; discriminatory practices surrounding divorce and child custody; the absence of a law criminalizing violence against women; and difficulties preventing many women from escaping abusive environments.

Shari'a prohibits abuse and violence against all innocent persons, including women. Shari'a also criminalizes rape, an act punishable by death, although this punishment did not extend to spousal rape. Statistics on incidents of rape and convictions were not available, but some cases were publicly known. For example, on April 20, Arab News reported the government executed two soldiers for the rape of a 20-year-old noncitizen woman. On October 14, as reported by the Saudi Press Agency, authorities executed a citizen in Qassim for theft and rape under the influence of alcohol.

Cases of rape were difficult to document in view of the associated social stigma against the victims; however, available information indicated that rape against women and boys and domestic violence against women remained serious problems. The majority of rape cases are not reported because victims face societal reprisal, often being deemed unfit for marriage or even punished as a result of having been raped.

There were no laws specifically outlawing domestic violence, and the number of cases was difficult to determine due to taboos about public reporting. In 2007 the NSHR reported that women continued to suffer largely unreported abuse at the hands of their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Violence against women was widely tolerated. Abusers were rarely prosecuted, and investigations were rarely carried out for complaints of violent attacks, rapes, murders, or suicides of women. Women who reported rape faced imprisonment and accusations of adultery.

In July 2007, in response to the lack of services for victims of domestic violence, the king issued a royal decree establishing the National Family Safety program. In September the Committee of Social Protection, a new organization consisting of various government departments, launched a program to inform health workers about domestic violence and child abuse. During the year the HRC fielded complaints of domestic abuse and facilitated their resolution by referring them to other government offices. In 2007 media reports highlighted the lack of effectiveness by public institutions in responding to domestic violence. Public institutions, including the Ministry of Social Affairs, HRC, and NSHR, continued to receive reports of domestic violence. Reports indicated improvement in responsiveness to claims from the public. Media reports on the problem decreased during the year.

According to a study by HRW, there were approximately 1.5 million foreign domestic workers in the country, most of whom were women. No statistics were available on the frequency of domestic worker abuse; however, foreign NGOs and the English language press frequently reported cases. On June 12, the Saudi Gazette reported an Indonesian domestic worker was admitted to a Dammam hospital with signs of physical abuse and died shortly after being admitted. On June 27, Arab News reported a domestic worker was gang-raped by four men, including her employer, and left at the gate of her country's embassy. On July 27, Arab News reported a domestic worker had taken shelter at her country's embassy after she was abducted and gang-raped. On August 8, a Nepali woman sought help from her embassy and claimed rape and physical abuse by her sponsor.

The English language press published several editorials calling attention to problems relating to domestic workers' rights. Embassy representatives from origin countries stated that cases of foreign domestic worker abuse were

increasing, but added that these represented the minority of experiences among their nationals in the kingdom. NSHR submitted proposed changes to the sponsorship system that would redefine the relationship between employee and sponsor, with the intent of decreasing abuse; the government had not acted on these recommendations by year's end.

More than 500 domestic workers sought shelter at their respective embassies as a result of sexual abuse or other violence. Foreign embassies received many reports that employers abused foreign women working as domestic servants. Some embassies from countries with large domestic servant populations maintained safe houses for citizens fleeing work situations that included forced confinement, withholding of food, nonpayment of salaries, beating, physical abuse, or rape. In one case an employer accused a recruiting agency of beating domestic workers. The media and diplomatic missions of sending countries accused employers of committing many abuses against domestic workers, such as forced confinement, withholding of food, nonpayment of salaries, and beatings.

During the year reports of domestic worker abuse increased. According to the Arab News, the Indonesian Embassy reported 102 complaints of sexual assault and 156 cases of physical torture involving its citizens in the first half of the year. The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment reportedly decided to curb the number of Sri Lankan domestic workers coming to the region, citing increased cases of abuse. An estimated 500,000 Sri Lankan domestic workers live in the kingdom. On September 11, the Saudi Gazette reported that the government of the Philippines is considering increasing the minimum age requirement for Philippine domestic workers in the country to reduce exposure to abuse. A public awareness campaign called "Don't Deprive Me of My Humanity," launched by a television station in Qatar and broadcast in the country, highlighted abuse of domestic workers through graphic imagery and sparked national debate on the subject.

Prostitution is illegal. However, some women (and men), primarily noncitizens, reportedly engaged in prostitution. The extent of prostitution was unknown. Trafficking of women and children for commercial sexual exploitation was reported.

Law and custom discriminated against women. Women--particularly in villages and rural areas--continued to face discrimination and remained uninformed of their rights under Shari'a. Although they have the right to own property and are entitled to financial support from husbands or male relatives, women have few political or social rights and were not treated as equal members of society. In accordance with the religious establishment's interpretation of Shari'a, women were prohibited from marrying non Muslims, but men were permitted to marry Christians and Jews. Women may not marry noncitizens without government permission; men must obtain government permission to marry noncitizen women from outside the six states of the GCC.

There were no legally recognized human rights groups focusing specifically on women's rights. NSHR addressed various women's rights issues. HRC opened a women's branch in Riyadh to look into human rights violations against women and children. Human rights activists reported there was more progress in women's rights than in other human rights areas.

Women were restricted in their use of public facilities when men were present and sat in designated sections. Women risked arrest by religious police for riding in a vehicle driven by a male who was not an employee or a close male relative.

In public a woman must wear an abaya (a black garment that covers the entire body) and also cover her head and hair. The religious police generally expected Muslim women to cover their faces and non Muslim women from other Asian and African countries to comply more fully with local customs of dress than non Muslim Western women.

Women were also subject to discrimination under Shari'a as interpreted by the government. While Shari'a provides

women with a basis to own and dispose of property independently, women were often constrained from asserting such rights because of legal and societal barriers, especially regarding employment and freedom of movement. In a Shari'a court, the testimony of one man equals that of two women, and Shari'a stipulates that daughters receive half the inheritance awarded to their brothers.

Divorce laws also discriminated against women. Women had to demonstrate legally specified grounds for divorce, but men could divorce without giving cause. In doing so men were required to pay immediately an amount of money agreed upon at the time of the marriage that serves as a one time alimony payment. Women who demonstrate legal grounds for divorce also were entitled to this alimony. Under the country's interpretation of Shari'a, husbands who "verbally" divorce their wives, or refuse to sign final divorce papers, leave their wives in legal limbo, unable to travel, obtain a business license, attend a university or college, or seek hospital care. If she is divorced or widowed, a Muslim woman normally may keep her children until they attain a specified age: seven years for boys and nine years for girls. Courts awarded custody of older children to the divorced husband or the deceased husband's family. Numerous divorced foreign women continued to be prevented by their former husbands from visiting their children after divorce.

Women had access to free but segregated education through the university level. They constituted more than 58 percent of all university students but could not study some subjects such as architecture or civil engineering. Women's participation increased in vocational training, with course offerings in information technology, finance and accounting, and fields that promoted development of small business, such as graphics, Web design, food manufacturing and fashion. On October 15, Arab News reported that under the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship program, 2,858 of 4,779 students selected for master's degree scholarships were women. Of the 127 students selected for doctoral degree scholarships, 86 were women. Men may study overseas; the law provides that a woman may do so only if accompanied by a spouse or male guardian or the family provides written permission. The government paid the costs for a male guardian (or in some cases an older female guardian) to accompany female students on scholarships.

Most employment opportunities for women were in education and health care. Despite limited educational opportunities in many professional fields, some female citizens were able to study abroad and returned to work in architecture, journalism, banking, and photography. During the year women were allowed to study law for the first time. In October King Abdullah launched construction of the country's first women-only university.

Women who wished to enter nontraditional fields were subject to discrimination. Women may not accept jobs in rural areas if there are no adult male relatives present with whom they may reside and who agree to take responsibility for them. Most workplaces in which women were present were segregated by gender. Frequently, contact with a male supervisor or client was allowed only by video conference, telephone, or fax machine. The degree of segregation varied by region, and the central region had the most restrictions. Despite gender segregation, the law provides women the right to obtain business licenses for work in fields that might require them to supervise foreign workers, interact with male clients, or deal on a regular basis with government officials.

Businesswomen were constrained by the concept of guardianship, which required a male guardian to give permission before a woman could own or operate a business. However, home-based and women-only businesses increased, with government support. According to a study by the JCCI, 78 percent of women were unemployed, although 45 percent of respondents saw no hurdles that prevented their participation in the job market.

In medical settings and in the energy industry, women and men worked together, and in some instances women supervised male employees. Women have the right to maternity leave and child care in establishments with 50 or more female employees.

Sexual harassment as a social phenomenon was reported in the Arabic language press, but its extent was difficult to measure. The government's interpretation of Shari'a currently guides courts on cases of sexual harassment, which are seldom reported. Many workplaces maintained separate male and female work spaces.

Children

The government acted to protect children, and society generally considered protection of children a human rights priority. The government provided all citizen children with free education and medical care, but these benefits did not extend to noncitizen children. Children were segregated by gender in public and government-sponsored schools, usually beginning at the age of seven; however, schools were integrated through the fourth grade, or around the ages of 10 and 11, in some areas.

Abuse of children occurred, although it was difficult to gauge its prevalence since the government kept no national statistics on child abuse. The Committee for Social Protection initiated a campaign to train health workers to identify signs of abuse. At least three NGOs--one in Riyadh, one in Qasim, and one in Jeddah--ran shelters for women and children.

The press reported a number of cases of child marriage involving young female children wed to young male children or to much older males, both by arranged marriage and without the participants' consent. Several cases were challenged in court. On August 18, the Saudi Gazette reported a court in Bisha granted the divorce of a 14-year-old girl and a 70-year-old man. On August 29, the Saudi Gazette reported a court would hear the divorce cases of two minor females, ages 16 and 11, both married to men older than 70. In December a judge refused to annul the marriage of an eight-year-old girl to a man in his 50s in a case that drew international media attention. The girl's father arranged the marriage to help settle his debts with a close friend. These cases led the public, the media, and local human rights organizations to call for an end to child marriages. The HRC called upon the MOJ to establish a minimum age for marriage, highlighting that the country is a signatory to the 1996 Convention on the Rights of the Child. In November the Consultative Council recommended that the king raise the legal age of adulthood from 15 to 18.

In contrast to previous years, there were no reports of sexual exploitation of foreign children brought to the country during the Hajj.

Trafficking in Persons

The law does not prohibit all forms of trafficking in persons. The labor law penalizes some types of forced labor but limits penalties to fines and bans on future hiring of the trafficked person. The labor laws do not apply to domestic servants, the largest group of forced labor victims in the country. There is no law specifically prohibiting trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation. The government did not demonstrate efforts to criminalize trafficking as a distinct crime during the year. There have been some cases of assault against foreign workers resulting in physical injuries or death and reports of widespread worker abuse. The government reported no criminal investigations, prosecutions, convictions, or sentences for trafficking offenses, and there were no penalties prescribed for particular offenses. The government does not enforce fines or bans on hiring workers imposed upon abusive employers or recruitment agencies, and police were criticized for being unresponsive to requests for help from foreign workers. The government on rare occasions imposed small fines or bans on importing foreign labor to individuals or companies found culpable in nonpayment of employees.

The country was a destination for large numbers of workers from Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Yemen, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Indonesia and for smaller numbers of workers from many other Middle Eastern, Asian and African countries. The hiring of African laborers, particularly as domestic servants, increased due to a decrease

of Asian and Southeast Asian domestic workers. Some foreign workers were subjected to conditions that constituted involuntary servitude, including nonpayment of wages, debt bondage, withholding of passports, confinement, and forced 18-hour days with no days off. Domestic employees were especially vulnerable to trafficking into forced labor, in part due to deceptive hiring practices. The widespread practice of the employer holding passports and requiring the permission of the employer to secure an exit visa greatly increased the risk of trafficking, particularly for domestic workers. The Saudi Gazette reported on August 23 that the number of illegal maids in the country increased by 40 percent during the year. Many domestic workers leave their original employer to flee abuse or seek higher wages. Women from Yemen, Morocco, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Tajikistan, and Thailand were also trafficked to the country for commercial sexual exploitation, although no statistics indicate the prevalence of this practice. Others were reportedly kidnapped and forced into prostitution after running away from abusive employers. The country is a destination for children from Niger, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Chad, and Sudan, with victims often trafficked for forced labor as beggars and street vendors. Many of these individuals were trafficked across the border with Yemen. The MOI addressed the problem of children forced into begging by conducting raids to return trafficked children to their home countries.

The embassies of Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the Philippines maintained unofficial (unlicensed) safe houses in Riyadh for their citizens who were victims of trafficking. The consulates of these countries maintained safe houses in Jeddah. In August the Sri Lankan Consulate in Jeddah reported there were five people staying in the consulate's safe house, which can hold a maximum of 25-30 people. An estimated 1 percent of cases the Sri Lankan Consulate received involved abuse by employers; the consulate estimates another 1 percent of Sri Lankan domestic workers were trapped against their will by their employers and could not reach the consulate. Approximately 500,000 Sri Lankans work in the country. In August the Philippines Consulate in Jeddah reported 46 women were staying at the consulate safe house.

The government provided trafficking awareness and technical training for officials in the justice community, including prosecutors, investigators, and judges. However, it is not clear how many officials participated in this training. Due to a lack of victim identification procedures in deportation centers and police stations, many victims of trafficking reportedly were arrested and deported rather than being afforded protection services. Some victims were protected at one of three shelters the Ministry of Social Affairs operated in Riyadh, Dammam, and Jeddah. Trafficking victims who needed medical care were treated at public hospitals. Others feared arrest or deportation due to their status as runaways (technically, it is illegal for a foreign employee to run away from a legal sponsor in the country) or as prostitutes; as such, most victims fled directly to their respective embassies to await repatriation rather than approaching the government. The government assisted some domestic worker trafficking victims with shelter, access to legal and medical services, and temporary residency status, including temporary relief from deportation. The government did not provide information about whether protection services were afforded to victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

There were no reports of government or police involvement in trafficking during the year.

The government distributed a brochure outlining noncitizen workers' rights and obligations, as well as contact information for seeking assistance. The brochure is distributed to foreign embassies and is available at ports of entry.

The State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons Report can be found at www.state.gov/g/tip.

Persons with Disabilities

The law does not prohibit discrimination against persons with disabilities. A 2000 royal decree provides prevention, welfare and habilitation services to persons with disabilities and their families, and encourages institutions and

individuals to contribute to charitable activities within the field of disability. There is no legislation that mandates public accessibility; however, newer commercial buildings often included such access, as did some newer government buildings. The provision of government social services increasingly brought persons with disabilities into the public mainstream. The law provides hiring quotas for persons with disabilities, but information regarding whether employers met these quotas was not available. The government and private charitable organizations cooperated in education, employment, and other services for persons with disabilities.

Foreign criminal rings reportedly imported children with disabilities for the purpose of forced begging. According to the Ministry of Social Affairs, there were numerous government sponsored centers for persons with disabilities, including organizations for children with Down syndrome and autism.

On July 3, the JCCI held an entertainment festival for persons with disabilities. The festival aimed to encourage local businesses to hire persons with disabilities.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Although racial discrimination is illegal, there was substantial societal prejudice based on ethnic or national origin. Foreign workers from Africa and Asia were subject to various forms of formal and informal discrimination and had the most difficulty in obtaining justice for their grievances.

During the year there were fewer media reports of married couples whom family members forced to divorce because either the husband or wife was from "inappropriate lineage," i.e., a nontribal family or an "inferior" tribe. In January an appeals court in Riyadh upheld the forced divorce of Fatima al-Timani and her husband. Al-Timani's half-brothers successfully filed for their divorce on the grounds that the husband had lied about his tribal lineage.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Under Shari'a as interpreted in the country, sexual activity between two persons of the same gender is punishable by death or flogging. It is illegal for men "to behave like women" or wear women's clothes and for women to wear men's clothes. There were reports of societal discrimination, physical violence, and harassment based on sexual orientation.

In June the Saudi Gazette reported that the Court of Cassation declined to endorse an "excessive" court sentence of a man convicted by a lower court of "trying to be a woman" by wearing makeup and women's clothes. The lower court sentenced the man to 10 years' imprisonment and 1,500 lashes. No further information on the sentence status was available.

According to media reports, in late July police arrested 55 people at a "gay party" on a farm near Qatif. Also in July, police arrested a group of persons at a pool hall in Jeddah for "practicing homosexuality." At year's end there were no reports of outcomes in either case.

In October 2007 a court in al-Baha Province sentenced two men to 7,000 lashes each for engaging in sexual intercourse with other men. According to AI, the two men have reportedly received part of their sentence.

There was no overt discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS, although the disease is treated as a social taboo. Press reports indicated the disease was found in noncitizens. By law foreign workers were required to provide a health certification proving they did not have HIV/AIDS before entering the country.

Incitement to Acts of Discrimination

In 2007 the government reported that the 2006 multi year project to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to promote tolerance and remove content disparaging religions other than Islam was under way. Despite revisions to elementary and secondary textbooks, the books still retained some language that was intolerant of other religious traditions, especially Jewish, Christian, and Shia beliefs.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The labor code does not allow workers to form and join independent unions of their choice; however, the government allowed a few citizen-only labor committees to operate with heavy limitations on the right of association. Several small strikes occurred during the reporting period, with workers immediately arrested and/or deported.

The labor code makes no provision for workers legally to strike.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

Collective bargaining is not protected by law and was not practiced.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

Although labor laws do not specifically address all forms of forced or compulsory labor, they outlaw slavery. Labor laws also establish rules for voluntary working conditions and pay, including by children, and thus implicitly prohibit forced labor; however, many foreign workers were nevertheless subjected to abusive conditions that constituted involuntary servitude or forced labor, including nonpayment of wages for months and years, debt bondage, confinement, confiscation of travel and identity documents, long hours without days off, contract switching, intimidation, and physical abuse.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

Child labor occurred in the country, with child begging among poor citizens and trafficked foreigners the most common form. Children from other countries, primarily Yemen, were forced into child begging rings, street vending, and possibly family businesses. There were reports of foreign domestic workers younger than 18, some of whom traveled to the country with forged documents.

No person younger than 15 may be legally employed unless he is the only family worker. There is no minimum age for workers employed in family owned businesses or in other areas considered extensions of the household, such as farming, herding, and domestic service. Children younger than 18 may not be employed in hazardous or harmful industries, such as mining or industries employing power operated machinery, and there is no evidence that this occurred.

A study commissioned by the King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology found that child labor was a growing phenomenon. According to the study, 1.54 percent of children work, including 2.3 percent in Eastern Province. A separate study reported by Arab News found that nearly 69 percent of child beggars in Riyadh are citizen children. On October 13, Okaz reported the result of a study by the King Abdullah Institute for Research and Studies indicating there are more than 83,000 children working on the streets in the country.

The MOJ has jurisdiction and has acted as plaintiff in the few cases that have arisen against alleged violators. The Social Affairs Ministry maintained special offices in Mecca and Medina to combat the growing problem of child beggars.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There is no national minimum wage for workers; however, the unofficial private sector minimum wage for citizens was 1,500 riyals (approximately \$400) per month, based on the minimum monthly contribution to the pension system, and this appeared to provide a decent standard of living for a citizen worker and family. Individual contracts also set wages that varied according to the type of work performed and the nationality of the worker, with low and unskilled expatriate workers generally receiving lower wages than citizens. Foreign workers comprise approximately 88 percent of the workforce in the private sector.

Labor regulations establish a 48 hour work week at regular pay and allow employers to require up to 12 additional hours of overtime at time and a half pay. The law also provides for a 24 hour rest period, normally on Fridays, although the employer may grant it on another day. However, there were credible reports that female domestic servants were sometimes forced to work 16 to 20 hours per day, seven days per week, with little or no pay. Such reports are more common during the month of Ramadan, when citizens commonly eat and socialize at night.

Many foreign workers were subjected to abusive conditions, including nonpayment of wages for periods of time ranging from several months to more than a year, debt bondage, confinement, confiscation of travel and identity documents, long hours without days off, contract switching, intimidation, and physical abuse; however, the Ministry of Labor's department for protection of foreign workers addressed some cases of abuse and exploitation. Foreign workers were able to submit complaints and seek help from the 37 Labor Ministry offices throughout the country, although responsiveness was an issue. The ministry occasionally banned individuals and companies who mistreated foreign workers from sponsoring such workers for five years. Employers with repeated violations were banned indefinitely.

Foreign workers in occupations other than household work could also turn to labor courts to resolve labor disputes. These courts regularly ruled in favor of workers; due to red tape and lack of capacity, they sometimes took many months to reach a final ruling. Because labor laws do not apply to foreign domestic servants, the servants may not seek the protection of labor courts, although there were reports that some domestic workers pleaded their cases before a judge.

Bilateral labor agreements stipulate work conditions for workers from some countries, although enforcement was sometimes a problem.

Labor regulations require employers to protect some workers from job related hazards and disease, although violations occurred. These regulations did not cover farmers, herdsmen, domestic servants, and workers in family operated businesses. Foreign nationals reported frequent failures to enforce health and safety standards. Many foreign workers were not able to exercise their right to remove themselves from dangerous situations. This was particularly true for domestic workers, who were occasionally locked inside the home or threatened with nonpayment if they left their employer.