

Regional Overviews

Africa

Several African countries served as stabilizing forces on the continent and as powerful examples of the peace and stability that come with respect for the rule of law. Nevertheless, during the year, human rights and democratic development in the region continued to face severe challenges, especially in a number of countries plagued by conflict and others in which a culture of rule of law was fledgling or did not exist.

In many countries, civilians continued to suffer from abuses at the hands of government security forces acting with impunity. In several countries, the systematic use of torture by security forces on detainees and prisoners remained a severe problem, and conditions in detention centers and prisons often were squalid and life threatening. Many detainees suffered lengthy pretrial detentions, waiting months or years before going before a judge.

For those countries embroiled in conflicts, ending violence remained central to improving human rights conditions. Warring parties failed to implement political agreements designed to bring peace and stability. Violent conflict continued or erupted anew in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and Sudan, resulting in mass killings, rape, and displacements of civilians. The Sudanese government continued to collaborate with janjaweed militias to bomb and destroy villages, killing or displacing hundreds of thousands more innocent civilians.

Authoritarian rule continued to characterize many African countries, for example: in Zimbabwe, the Mugabe regime unleashed a campaign of terror that resulted in the killing, disappearance, and torture of hundreds of opposition party members and supporters following the March 29 elections that were not free and fair. Government repression, restrictions, and mismanagement caused the displacement of tens of thousands, increased food insecurity, and created a cholera epidemic, which killed 1,500 people by year's end. Previously postponed presidential elections were further delayed in Cote d'Ivoire. A coup ousted a democratically elected government in Mauritania. Following the death of Lansana Conte, Guinea's longtime president, a military junta seized power in a coup and suspended the constitution.

There were, however, some bright spots during the year. Angola held its first elections since 1992 and there were peaceful, orderly, and democratic elections in Ghana and Zambia. Due process and respect for the rule of law prevailed in Nigeria as

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Introduction to the
2008 Country Reports on
Human Rights Practices¶
The year just ended was
characterized by three
trends: a growing
worldwide demand for
greater personal and
political freedom,
governmental efforts to
push back on those
freedoms, and further
confirmation that human
rights flourish best in
participatory
democracies with
vibrant civil
societies. ¶
These congressionally
mandated reports
describe the
performance in 2008 of
governments across the
globe in putting into
practice their
international
commitments on human
rights. We hope that
they will help focus
attention on human
rights abuses and bring
action to end them. At
the same time, we hope
that the hard-won
advances for human
freedom chronicled in
the reports will
hearten those still
pressing for their
rights, often against
daunting odds. ¶
These reports will
inform U.S. government
policymaking and serve
as a reference for
other governments,
intergovernmental
institutions, and
nongovernmental
organizations (NGOs),
human rights defenders,
and journalists. United
States foreign policy
revolves not only
around effective
defense, but also
robust diplomacy and
vigorous support for
political and economic
development. A
vigorous human rights
policy reaffirms
American values and
advances our national
interests. As
President Obama stated
in his inaugural
address: "America is a
friend of each nation
and every man, woman, and child." [1]

opposition candidates from the 2007 presidential election respected the Nigerian Supreme Court's ruling upholding President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's election. The United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda sentenced a former Rwandan army colonel to life in prison for organizing the militants responsible for the killing of 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus during the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

Selected Country Developments

The human rights situation in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** (DRC) deteriorated further during the year, severely undermining the country's progress since national elections in 2006. Despite the signing of the Goma peace accords in January and the presence of UN peacekeepers, fighting continued in North and South Kivu throughout the year. Security forces and all armed groups continued to act with impunity, committing frequent serious abuses including arbitrary killings, disappearances, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, rape, looting, and the use of children as combatants. The conflict continued to fuel the worst humanitarian crisis in Africa, resulting in as many as 45,000 Congolese deaths each month, a total of more than one million internally displaced persons, and dozens of attacks on humanitarian workers by armed groups. Pervasive sexual violence continued, including more than 2,200 registered cases of rape in June in North Kivu alone. Throughout the country, security forces harassed, beat, intimidated, and arrested local human rights advocates and journalists, resulting in a marked deterioration in press freedom.

Eritrea's poor human rights record worsened and the government continued to commit serious abuses including unlawful killings by security forces with impunity. The ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) is the only legal political party and no national elections have been held since Eritrea gained independence in 1993. The constitution, ratified in 1997, has never been implemented. The independent press remained banned, and most independent journalists were in detention or had fled the country. Government roundups of young people for national service intensified in 2008. Credible reports indicate that national service evaders were tortured while in detention, and security forces shot individuals trying to cross the border into Ethiopia. Religious freedom, already severely restricted, declined further. At year's end over 3,200 Christians from unregistered groups were detained in prison, as were more than 35 leaders and pastors of Pentecostal churches, some of whom had been detained for more than three years without charge or due

process. At least three religious prisoners died in captivity during the year, from torture and lack of medical treatment.

The violence following **Kenya's** December 2007 local, parliamentary, and presidential elections ended in February when an international mediation process produced an agreement to form a coalition government under which President Mwai Kibaki retained his office, and opposition candidate Raila Odinga was appointed to a newly-created prime ministerial position. The political settlement established a reform framework to investigate and address the underlying causes of the violence, which killed approximately 1,500 persons and displaced more than 500,000. Progress on reform was slow and efforts to address the economic and social aftermath of the violence were incomplete. Separately, the deployment of security forces to Mount Elgon to quell an abusive militia resulted in human rights abuses by security forces.

Mauritania's human rights record deteriorated, with an abridgement of citizens' rights to change their government, arbitrary arrests, and the political detentions of the president and prime minister following an August 6 coup. The president was released from detention in December; however, the military junta, known as the High State Council (HSC), remained in power with General Mohamed Aziz as head of state at the end of the year. Members of the international community, including the African Union, strongly condemned the coup. Prior to the August 6 coup, the then-democratically elected government supported nationwide sensitization on a new antislavery law and increased public discussion on formerly taboo issues, such as ethnic divisions and social injustices. That government also supported national reconciliation efforts regarding the country's 1989-1991 expulsion of Afro-Mauritanians through the launch of a repatriation program in coordination with UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

In **Nigeria**, the courts continued to adjudicate the results of the seriously flawed 2007 presidential, gubernatorial, and legislative elections. On December 12, the Supreme Court rejected the appeals of two major opposition presidential candidates, upholding the election of President Yar'Adua. The two opposition leaders respected the court's ruling. Election tribunals nullified nine senatorial elections and 11 gubernatorial elections during the year. Violence continued in the oil-producing Niger Delta region, where over 400 persons (Nigerian nationals and expatriates) were kidnapped in approximately 100 incidents during the year. In November, ethno-religious violence erupted in Jos, resulting in the deaths of

several hundred persons and the displacement of tens of thousands. Corruption continued to plague the resource-rich country and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission's anticorruption efforts declined, with little progress on prosecutions of federal, state, and local officials accused of corruption.

In **Somalia**, fighting among the Transitional Federal Government (TFG)/Ethiopian National Defense Forces and their militias, the Council of Islamic Courts militias, antigovernment and extremist groups, terrorist organizations, and clan militias resulted in widespread human rights abuses, including the killing of more than 1,000 civilians, the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, kidnappings and disappearances, and attacks on journalists, aid workers, civil society leaders, and human rights activists. The political process to establish peace and stability in the country continued as the TFG and the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia reached the Djibouti Agreement on June 9 and began to implement its terms; however, implementation was slow and marred by political infighting.

In **Sudan**, conflict in Darfur entered its fifth year and civilians continued to suffer from the effects of genocide. UN data from 2008 indicated that, since it began, the protracted conflict has left more than 2.7 million people internally displaced and another 250,000 across the border in Chad, where they sought refuge. Government, government-aligned militias, and intertribal attacks killed civilians. Government forces bombed villages, killed internally displaced persons, and collaborated with militias to raze villages. The government systematically impeded and obstructed humanitarian efforts, and rebels and bandits killed humanitarian workers. Unidentified assailants killed several joint AU-UN peacekeeping mission troops, and government forces attacked a peacekeeping convoy. On May 10, the Justice and Equality Movement, a Darfur rebel group, attacked Omdurman, near Khartoum. The government committed wide scale politically- and ethnically-motivated detentions and disappearances in Omdurman and Khartoum following the attack. The government severely restricted freedom of the press, including through direct and daily censorship. Since 2005, when the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the North and the South was signed, approximately 2.1 million displaced persons and refugees have returned to the South. However, tensions over the implementation of the CPA persisted, and fighting between northern and southern forces destroyed much of Abyei town, killing civilians and displacing more than 50,000 people.

Zimbabwe's illegitimate government engaged in the systematic abuse of human rights, which increased dramatically during the year, in conjunction with an escalating humanitarian crisis caused by repression, corruption, and destructive economic and food policies, which the Mugabe regime persisted in applying despite their disastrous humanitarian consequences. Civil society and humanitarian organizations were targeted by government and militant groups for their efforts to protect citizens' rights and provide life-saving humanitarian assistance. A nearly three-month ban on the activities of NGOs exacerbated the humanitarian crisis as well as food insecurity and poverty. After the ban was lifted, the Mugabe regime continued to impede humanitarian access. Millions of Zimbabweans were food insecure at year's end.

The regime's manipulation of the political process, including the presidential elections, through intimidation, violence, corruption and vote fraud negated the right of citizens to change their government. Security forces and ruling party supporters killed, abducted, and tortured members of the opposition, student leaders, civil society activists and ordinary Zimbabweans with impunity. The opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) factions gained a parliamentary majority in the March 29 election, but the results of the presidential race were not released until May 2, calling into question the credibility and independence of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. Government-sponsored violence in the period leading up to the June 27 run-off left more than 190 dead, thousands injured, and tens of thousands displaced. The Electoral Commission declared Mugabe the winner of the run-off election after MDC candidate Morgan Tsvangirai--who had scored a strong plurality in the first round--withdrew because of the Mugabe regime's violence directed at the MDC and its supporters and out of recognition that a free and fair election was not possible. Negotiations mandated by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) led to a September 15 power-sharing agreement; however, due to government intransigence, the provisions of the deal had not been implemented by year's end and the country remained in crisis.

East Asia and the Pacific

During the year there were both advances and setbacks in human rights in the vast East Asia and the Pacific region, particularly in the areas of accountability for past abuses, freedom of speech and the press, democratic development, and trafficking in persons.

Countries in the region continued to come to terms with past abuses. The Bilateral Commission of Truth and Friendship, created to examine the atrocities committed by both Indonesians and Timorese during the period surrounding Timor-Leste's 1999 independence referendum, delivered its final report during the year. Indonesian President Yudhoyono acknowledged and accepted the report's finding that assigned institutional responsibility to the Indonesian Armed Forces. In addition, in August the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia refined its internal rules to prosecute more rapidly egregious crimes of the 1975-1979 Khmer Rouge regime. However, the trials had still not begun by year's end.

Some countries increased repression in response to popular efforts to secure respect for human rights. Vietnam increased restrictions on freedom of speech and press, and in China the government increased its severe cultural and religious repression of ethnic minorities in Tibetan areas and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and increased its detention and harassment of dissidents and petitioners.

Other unelected rulers attempted to cloak their illegitimacy with trappings of democracy and manipulated the law to their own ends. The Burmese regime pushed through a constitutional referendum characterized by widespread irregularities and intimidation in the immediate aftermath of the devastating Cyclone Nargis. While the constitution technically came into effect in May, by the constitution's own terms, the regime will continue to "exercise state sovereignty" until multiparty elections are held in 2010. The constitution will ensure that the military will continue to exercise a dominant role in political life regardless of the outcome of any electoral process. At the end of the year, the regime imposed draconian sentences on more than 100 democracy activists who participated in the 2007 Saffron Revolution and individuals who engaged in the Cyclone relief effort. Many were moved to prisons in remote parts of the country, isolating them from family. In Fiji, the Suva High Court ruled to validate the 2006 Fiji coup, despite simmering opposition to the interim government's refusal to hold elections in March 2009.

Trafficking in persons was another area where results were mixed during the year. Several countries enacted new antitrafficking legislation--such as Thailand and Cambodia--and began to investigate and prosecute a broader range of trafficking offenses, such as the trafficking of men for labor exploitation. However, in Malaysia, widespread NGO and media reports alleged

that Malaysian immigration officials were involved in the trafficking of Burmese refugees along the Malaysia-Thai border.

Selected Country Developments

The military regime in **Burma** continued its oppressive methods, denying citizens the right to change their government and committing other severe human rights abuses. The regime brutally suppressed dissent through extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and torture. Human rights and prodemocracy activists were harassed, arbitrarily detained in large numbers, and sentenced up to 65 years of imprisonment. The regime held detainees and prisoners in life-threatening conditions. The army continued its attacks on ethnic minority areas. The regime routinely infringed on citizens' privacy and restricted freedom of speech, the press, assembly, association, religion, and movement. Violence and discrimination against women and ethnic minorities continued, as did trafficking in persons. Workers' rights were restricted and forced labor persisted. The government took no significant actions to prosecute or punish those responsible for such abuses. The regime showed contempt for the welfare of its own citizens when it persisted in conducting a fraudulent referendum in the immediate aftermath of a cyclone that killed tens of thousands and blocked and delayed international assistance that could have saved many lives.

The government of **China's** human rights record remained poor and worsened in some areas. The government continued to limit citizens' privacy rights and tightly controlled freedom of speech, the press (including the Internet), assembly, movement, and association. Authorities committed extrajudicial killings and torture, coerced confessions of prisoners, and used forced labor. In addition, the Chinese government increased detention and harassment of dissidents, petitioners, human rights defenders, and defense lawyers. Local and international NGOs continued to face intense scrutiny and restrictions. China's human rights record worsened in some areas, including severe cultural and religious repression of ethnic minorities in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and Tibet. Abuses peaked around high-profile events, such as the Olympic Games and the unrest in Tibet. At the end of the year, the government harassed signatories of Charter '08 who called for respect for universal human rights and reform and arrested writer Liu Xiaobo for his participation in the drafting of the Charter. In October, the government made permanent temporary Olympic Games-related regulations granting foreign journalists greater freedoms.

The Government of **Malaysia** generally respected the human rights of its citizens; however, there were problems in some areas, including the abridgment of its citizens' right to change their government. Despite their complaint that the ruling party exploited the powers of incumbency, opposition parties made significant gains by capturing 82 of 222 parliamentary seats in March 8 elections, effectively denying the ruling coalition the two-thirds supermajority needed to amend the constitution at will. The government continued to restrict freedoms of press, association, assembly, speech, and religion. The government arrested opposition leaders and journalists. Internet bloggers were arrested for apparently political reasons. Deaths in police custody remained a problem, as did police abuse of detainees, overcrowded immigration detention centers, and persistent questions about the impartiality and independence of the judiciary. Some employers exploited migrant workers and ethnic Indian-Malaysians with forced labor, and some child labor occurred in plantations.

North Korea's human rights record remained abysmal. While the regime continued to control almost all aspects of citizens' lives, denying freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association, and restricting freedom of movement and workers' rights, reports of abuse emerged from the country with increased frequency. However, these reports continued to be difficult to confirm. Reports of extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and arbitrary detention, including of political prisoners, continued to paint a grim picture of life inside the reclusive country. Some forcibly repatriated refugees were said to have undergone severe punishment and possibly torture. Reports of public executions also continued to emerge.

Despite a tumultuous political atmosphere, **Thailand** avoided unconstitutional disruptions in governance. Nevertheless, there continued to be reports that police were linked to extrajudicial killings and disappearances. Police abuse of detainees and prisoners persisted as well, as did corruption within the police force. The separatist insurgency in the south resulted in numerous human rights abuses, including killings, committed by ethnic Malay Muslim insurgents, Buddhist defense volunteers, and government security forces. The government maintained some limits on freedom of speech and of the press, particularly through the use of lese majeste provisions. Members of hill tribes without proper documentation continued to face restrictions on their movement; however, the 2008 Nationality Act, which took effect on February 28, increased the possibility of citizenship for hill tribe members.

The government of **Vietnam** continued to restrict citizens' rights in significant ways. Citizens could not change their government, political opposition movements were prohibited, and the government continued to suppress dissent. Individuals were arbitrarily detained for political activities and denied the right to fair and expeditious trials. Suspects were abused during arrest, detention, and interrogation. Corruption was a significant problem among the police force, as was impunity. The government continued to limit citizens' privacy rights and freedom of expression. There was a general crackdown on press freedom throughout the year, resulting in the firings of several senior media editors and the arrest of two reporters. These actions dampened what had previously been a trend toward more aggressive investigative reporting. Restrictions on assembly, movement, and association continued. Independent human rights organizations were prohibited. Violence and discrimination against women remained a problem, as did trafficking in persons. The government limited workers' rights and arrested or harassed several labor activists.

Europe and Eurasia

The key challenges in the region remained: strengthening new democracies, stemming government restrictions on and repression of human rights NGOs, and addressing hate crimes and hate speech while protecting fundamental freedoms against a backdrop of migration, rising nationalism, and economic recession.

In several post-Soviet countries, previous gains for human rights and democracy were reversed or the slide towards authoritarianism continued. A number of elections failed to meet democratic standards set by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and media freedom remained under attack. Journalists were killed or harassed, and laws often restricted rather than protected freedom of expression.

During the August conflict that began in the Georgian separatist enclave of South Ossetia, military operations by Georgian and Russian forces reportedly involved the use of indiscriminate force and resulted in civilian casualties, including a number of journalists. After the Russians entered South Ossetia, there were allegations that South Ossetian irregulars engaged in executions, torture, ethnic attacks, and random burning of homes, and at least 150,000 Georgian citizens were displaced by the fighting. Russian and South Ossetian forces occupied villages outside of the administrative borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the other separatist region in Georgia. Although

Russian forces mostly withdrew by October 10 from the regions outside of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, they blocked access to both regions for Georgians and international organizations, making it dangerous for residents and difficult to monitor conditions in the region with respect to human rights and compliance with humanitarian law.

In many countries, governments impeded the freedom of the press. In Azerbaijan, increasing numbers of attacks on journalists went unpunished, while journalists themselves remained in prison on purported criminal charges. Russia remained a dangerous place for journalists, a number of whom were killed or brutally attacked during the year. In Belarus, President Lukashenko signed a new media law that could further restrict press freedoms, including Internet publications. Developments in Georgia, including the opposition's loss of control of *Imedi* Television, which had been the sole remaining independent national television station, raised significant concerns about the state of media diversity.

NGOs and opposition parties were the targets of government oppression in several countries. The government of Bosnia and Herzegovina forced the closure for several days of an international anticorruption NGO after a report accusing government officials of corruption. In Russia, authorities increasingly harassed many NGOs that focused on politically sensitive areas and during the year the government amended the law on extremism, making it easier to bring charges against an organization. The previous version of the law had already raised concerns about restriction of the freedom of association and legitimate criticism of the government. In Belarus, while the release of nine political prisoners was welcome, concern remained about the government's arbitrary constraints on freedom of assembly and association and its frequent harassment of independent activists. In Russia, police sometimes used violence to prevent groups from engaging in peaceful protests, particularly opposition protests.

There were both hopeful and troubling indicators for democratic governance in the region. On a positive note, Kosovo's democratically-elected government successfully declared its independence on February 17, and put in place a constitution and laws with model provisions for human rights. Unfortunately, other nations did not have such encouraging results. The February presidential elections in Armenia were significantly flawed and followed by days of peaceful protests that the government ultimately put down violently. In Russia, the March presidential election was marked by problems both during the

campaign period and on Election Day, including bias by government-controlled or -influenced media in favor of the ruling party and its candidates, authorities' refusal to register opposition party candidates, lack of equal opportunity for conducting campaigns, and ballot fraud. Parliamentary elections in Belarus fell significantly short of OSCE commitments for democratic elections, and all of the 110 declared winners were government supporters. Elections in Azerbaijan failed to meet key OSCE commitments.

Human rights concerns were not limited to the eastern portion of the continent. A number of the well-established democracies of western and central Europe wrestled with continuing challenges resulting from the large influx of new migrants from the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere that strained economic and social resources and led to restrictive practices toward immigrants and many charges of mistreatment. In many countries, detention facilities for undocumented migrants suffered from poor conditions and were inferior to those for other detained individuals. The majority of hate crimes in Ukraine during the year involved people of African, Middle Eastern, and Asian origin. In Russia the disturbing and steady rise in xenophobic, racial, and ethnic attacks continued. There were manifestations of anti-Semitism in many countries in the region and incidents of violent anti-Semitic attacks remained a concern. In a number of countries, including Italy and Hungary, members of the Roma community were targets of societal violence, which in some cases was more frequent and lethal than in previous years.

France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom sought to outlaw hate speech in order to protect minorities from discrimination and violence. However, some human rights observers worried that this impinged on free speech.

Selected Country Developments

There were significant setbacks for democracy in **Armenia**, including the worst post-election violence seen in the Caucasus in recent years. After weeks of generally peaceful protests following a disputed February presidential election, the government used force to disperse protestors on March 1-2, which resulted in violent clashes and 10 deaths. The violence ushered in a 20-day state of emergency and a blackout of independent media during which the government severely curtailed civil liberties. During the remainder of the year, there were significant restrictions on the right to assemble peacefully or express political opinions freely without risk of retaliation, and several opposition sympathizers were convicted and

imprisoned with disproportionately harsh sentences for seemingly political reasons. Fifty-nine opposition sympathizers reportedly remained imprisoned on seemingly political grounds at year's end; no government officials were prosecuted for their alleged role in election-related crimes. Despite the mixed success of a politically-balanced fact-finding group established by the government to investigate the March events, the climate for democracy was further chilled by harassment, intimidation, and intrusive tax inspections against independent media and civil society activists.

In **Azerbaijan**, Ilham Aliyev was re-elected president for a second term in October in a process that international observers assessed did not meet international standards for a democratic election, despite some government improvement in the administration of the election. Shortcomings included serious restrictions on political participation and media, pressure and restrictions on observers, and flawed vote counting and tabulation processes. During the year restrictions and pressure on the media worsened. A media-monitoring NGO reported that during the first half of the year there were 22 acts of verbal or physical assault on journalists, up from 11 in the same period of 2007, with no accountability. Several journalists remained imprisoned on charges that many criticized as politically motivated. On December 30, the government announced that as of January 1, 2009, it would no longer permit Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Voice of America, or BBC to continue to broadcast on national television and FM radio frequencies; without these international broadcasters, the public no longer had access to unbiased news on any widely accessible broadcast media.

In **Belarus**, the government's human rights record remained very poor, and authorities continued to commit frequent serious abuses. Despite prior government assurances, parliamentary elections in September were neither free nor fair. Authorities failed to account for past politically motivated disappearances. Prison conditions remained extremely poor, and reports of abuse of prisoners and detainees continued. The judiciary lacked independence. The government further restricted civil liberties, including freedoms of press, speech, assembly, association, and religion. State security services used unreasonable force to disperse peaceful protesters. Corruption remained a problem. NGOs and political parties were subjected to harassment, fines, prosecution, and closure. Religious leaders were fined or deported for performing services and some churches were closed.

In **Georgia**, President Mikheil Saakashvili was reelected in January in an election that international observers found consistent with most OSCE democratic election commitments. However, they also highlighted significant challenges, including widespread allegations of intimidation and pressure and flawed vote counting. Problems also were noted in parliamentary elections in May. There were allegations of politically motivated detentions. Media diversity was reduced when opposition voices lost control over the one remaining national television station. During the August conflict, military operations by Georgian and Russian forces reportedly involved the use of indiscriminate force and resulted in civilian casualties, including of a number of journalists.

The **Russian Federation** continued a negative trajectory in its overall domestic human rights record with numerous reports of government and societal human right problems and abuses during the year. During the August conflict, military operations by Georgian and Russian forces reportedly involved the use of indiscriminate force and resulted in civilian casualties, including of a number of journalists. The government's human rights record remained poor in the North Caucasus with security forces reportedly engaged in killings, torture, abuse, violence, and other brutal treatment, often with impunity. In Chechnya, Ingushetiya, and Dagestan, security forces allegedly were involved in unlawful killings and politically motivated abductions; for a second year, there was a significant increase in the number of killings, usually by unknown assailants, of both civilians and officials in Ingushetiya.

Civil liberties continued to be under siege, reflecting an erosion of the government's accountability to its citizens. Government pressure weakened freedom of expression and media independence, and it remained a dangerous environment for media practitioners. Five journalists were killed during the year, in one case in Ingushetiya by police. Killings of journalists in past years remained unresolved. The government limited freedom of assembly, and police sometimes used violence to prevent groups from engaging in peaceful protest. Authorities' hostility toward, and harassment of some NGOs, in particular those involved in human rights monitoring, as well as those receiving foreign funding, reflected an overall contraction of space for civil society. Given an increasingly centralized political system where power is concentrated in the presidency and the office of prime minister, the problems that occurred in the December 2007 Duma elections were repeated in the March presidential elections, which failed to meet many international standards.

Near East and North Africa

Continued serious challenges for the promotion of democracy and human rights characterized the Middle East region during the year, though there were some notable steps forward.

Several governments, including Egypt, Iran, Libya, and Syria, continued to imprison activists because of their beliefs. Ayman Nour, the runnerup in the 2005 Egyptian presidential election, remained in prison in Egypt throughout the reporting period (although he was released on February 18, 2009). Iran's government regularly detains and persecutes women's rights and student activists, labor unionists, and human rights defenders. Iranian authorities continued to crack down on civil society institutions, notably by closing the Center for the Defense of Human Rights on December 21 as it prepared to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The government of Libya announced in March that it had released political activist Fathi El-Jahmi, but he remained in detention at the Tripoli Medical Center during the year and was granted only sporadic visits by his family. In Syria, the government detained several high-profile members of the human rights community, particularly individuals affiliated with the national council of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change, an umbrella organization of reformist opposition groups.

Along with greater access to information through the Internet and satellite television came greater restrictions on media, including Internet bloggers. In Egypt, police detained and allegedly tortured bloggers. Iran's best-known blogger, Hossein Derakhshan, was arrested late in the year. Tunisia regressed on media freedom, with authorities arresting or harassing bloggers. In Iraq, journalists continued to struggle for safety while reporting on politics, women's rights, and homosexuality. Although the number of killings of journalists in Iraq dropped last year, the death rate remained high.

Many countries in the region continued to restrict religious freedom and expression. Iran detained seven leaders of the Baha'i faith since May, and the Iranian president continued to denounce the existence of Israel. Saudi Arabia strictly prohibited public worship of faiths other than Sunni Islam, and religious minorities faced discrimination in access to education, employment, and representation in government. Members of religions that are not recognized by the government experienced personal and collective hardship in Egypt. Other

countries, such as Bahrain and Algeria, enacted discriminatory legislation or, like Jordan, continued to implement policies that favored the majority religions.

Legal and societal discrimination as well as violence against women continued throughout the region. Iranian women's rights activists were harassed, abused, arrested, and accused of "endangering national security" for participating in peaceful protests and demanding equal treatment under Iranian law through the One Million Signatures Campaign. However, other countries in the region witnessed incremental progress on women's rights and women actively sought leadership roles in local and national governments. In Kuwait, 27 women ran for office in May 2008 national elections, although none of the female candidates won. Also during the year, the UAE appointed its first female judge and two female ambassadors.

Some countries in the Near East have taken significant steps over the past several years to address worker abuse and to raise labor standards. Oman and Bahrain enacted comprehensive laws to combat human trafficking and Jordan extended labor law protections to expatriate household workers. Significant challenges remain, however, regarding protection for foreign workers and implementation of existing labor laws and regulations for all workers, especially for construction and household workers.

Selected Country Developments

In **Egypt**, there was a decline in the government's respect for freedoms of speech, press, association, and religion during the year. In particular, detentions and arrests of Internet bloggers appeared to be linked primarily to their efforts to organize demonstrations through their blogs and participation in street protests or other activism. The state of emergency, enacted in 1967, remained in place, and security forces used unwarranted lethal force and tortured and abused prisoners and detainees, in most cases with impunity.

The government of **Iran** intensified its systematic campaign of intimidation against reformers, academics, journalists, and dissidents through arbitrary arrests, detentions, torture, and secret trials that occasionally end in executions. Executions of defendants who were juveniles at the time of their arrest continued. Iranian-American dual nationals, as well as Iranians with contacts in or travel to the United States, continued to be targets of intimidation and harassment. Prior to parliamentary

elections in March, the Guardian Council disqualified almost 1,700 reformist candidates.

The general security situation throughout **Iraq** substantially improved and some reconciliation and easing of tensions occurred in several provinces. However, continuing insurgent and extremist violence against civilians undermined the government's ability to uphold the rule of law, resulting in widespread and severe human rights abuses. However, there were positive developments including the passage of the Provincial Election Law on September 24 calling for elections in 14 Arab majority provinces on January 31, 2009, with elections later in the year in the three Kurdish provinces and Tameem (Kirkuk). The November 16 adoption of a law authorizing the establishment of the constitutionally mandated Independent High Commission for Human Rights also marked a step forward to institutionalize protection of those rights.

In **Jordan**, civil society activists expressed concern about a new law on associations. The law, which has yet to be implemented, allows the government to deny registration of NGOs for any reason; dissolve associations; and intervene in the management, membership, and activities of NGOs. According to international and local NGOs prisons continued to be overcrowded and understaffed with inadequate food and health care and limited visitation. Although Jordanian law prohibits torture, Human Rights Watch reported that torture remained widespread and routine. There were reports by citizens and NGOs that political prisoners, including Islamists convicted of crimes against national security, received greater abuse than other prisoners, and guards abused prisoners with impunity. Women held a limited number of government leadership positions, albeit at levels higher than elsewhere in the region; at the same time, domestic violence and so-called honor crimes persisted. A 2007 press law abolished imprisonment of journalists for ideological offenses; however, limited detention and imprisonment of journalists for defamation and slander continued through provisions in the penal code. Many journalists reported that the threat of stringent fines led to self-censorship. In July the Labor Law was amended to include agriculture workers and domestic servants, placing them under some legal protections.

For a fourth consecutive year, internal violence and political battles hindered **Lebanon's** ability to improve the country's human rights situation. On May 7, opposition fighters led by Hizballah, a Shia opposition party and terrorist organization, seized control of Beirut International Airport and several West Beirut neighborhoods. On May 21, after 84 died and approximately

200 were wounded, rival leaders reached a deal to end the violence and the 18-month political feud. Despite the cessation of hostilities and parliament's May election of President Michel Sleiman, Hizballah retained significant influence over parts of the country, and the government made no tangible progress toward disbanding and disarming armed militia groups, including Hizballah.

The **Syrian** government continued to violate citizens' privacy rights and to impose significant restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association, in an atmosphere of government impunity and corruption. Security services disrupted meetings of human rights organizations and detained activists, organizers, and other regime critics without due process. Throughout the year, the government sentenced to prison several high-profile members of the human rights community, especially individuals affiliated with the national council of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change (DDDNC), an umbrella organization of reformist opposition groups.

In **Tunisia**, the government continued its systematic, severe repression of freedom of expression and association. The government remained intolerant of public criticism by human rights and opposition activists and used intimidation, criminal investigations, and violent harassment of editors and journalists to discourage criticism. Authorities strictly censored publications both in print and on line, and routinely harassed journalists. Security forces killed a political protestor during the year and detainees faced torture, sexual assault, and coercion in attempts to elicit confessions.

South and Central Asia

Significant attacks on basic rights, including the freedoms of expression, religion, and association, marked 2008 in South and Central Asia.

A number of governments in the region continued to harass individual journalists and media outlets, and several countries continued to restrict free access to information on the Internet, particularly in Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan, the government removed programs of a prominent independent broadcaster from state-run radio and television. A government-controlled Internet provider in Kazakhstan intermittently blocked specific news and opposition-focused Web sites. Both governments levied heavy criminal libel penalties against journalists and, in some cases, the journalists left the country due to fear for their own safety. As in years past, journalists

working in Turkmenistan were subject to government harassment, arrest, detention in psychological clinics, and violence. In Afghanistan, the government convicted a student journalist of blasphemy and sentenced him to death for distributing an article he downloaded from the Internet about women's rights in Islam; an appeals court reduced the sentence to 20 years in prison. In Pakistan, arrests of journalists declined following the election of a new government. Even so, unidentified actors continued to intimidate, abduct, and kill journalists, particularly in regions of internal conflict. In Sri Lanka, defense and government officials made threatening statements against independent media outlets in the aftermath of several unresolved attacks against members of the free press.

Freedom of religion came under attack in the region with the parliaments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan introducing laws that would increase restrictions on religious freedom, disproportionately affecting religious minorities, and through violence against minorities in the Indian state of Orissa. These actions took place in the context of increased harassment of minority religious groups by the governments of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan and continued harassment by the government of Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan welcomed a visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, but the government closely controlled and monitored all religious activity.

Significant issues remained on labor rights across the region. Child labor continued in agriculture and manufacturing sectors in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. There was widespread child labor in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in cotton and other sectors, and Uzbekistan continued to compel many schoolchildren to work in the cotton harvest. Although the government of Kazakhstan is making strides to eliminate child labor, the practice still occurs in the cotton and tobacco sectors. Forced labor, especially in the large informal sectors and among socially disadvantaged minorities, continued in Nepal, Pakistan, and India. Labor organizers in Bangladesh reported acts of intimidation and abuse as well as increased scrutiny by security forces.

Although some governments in the region restricted political opposition and prohibited genuine electoral competition, there were several improvements with regard to elections and political competition in South Asia. In Pakistan, the two main opposition parties, Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, together won majority seats in competitive parliamentary

elections and formed a coalition government ending nine years of military rule. The people of Maldives elected a former political prisoner as president in a free and fair election, peacefully unseating the longest-serving Asian leader. The Afghan Independent Election Commission led preparatory efforts for Afghanistan's second round of elections since the fall of the Taliban. Elections in Nepal produced the most diverse legislature in the country's history, and the new parliament subsequently declared Nepal a federal democratic republic, peacefully dissolving the monarchy. Bangladesh held free and fair parliamentary elections with isolated irregularities and sporadic violence. The elections and subsequent peaceful transfer of power ended two years of rule by a military-backed caretaker government. In Bhutan, elections for the lower house of parliament completed the country's transition to a constitutional and limited monarchy with genuine popular oversight and participation.

Selected Country Developments

Although human rights in **Afghanistan** have improved significantly since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the country's record remained poor due to weak central government institutions and a deadly insurgency. The Taliban, Al-Qa'ida, and other extremist groups continued attacks against government officials, security forces, NGOs and other aid personnel, and unarmed civilians. There were continued reports of arbitrary arrests and detentions, extrajudicial killings, torture, and poor prison conditions. Government repression and armed groups prevented the media from operating freely.

In **Bangladesh**, levels of violence declined significantly and the caretaker government oversaw successful elections, but the government's human rights record remained a matter of serious concern. The state of emergency, which the government imposed in January 2007 and lifted on December 17, curtailed many fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the right to post bail. The government's anticorruption drive was greeted by popular support but gave rise to concerns about fairness and equality under the law. Although the number of extrajudicial killings decreased, security forces committed serious abuses, including extrajudicial killings, custodial deaths, arbitrary arrest and detention, and harassment of journalists. Some members of security forces acted with impunity and committed acts of torture, and the government failed to investigate fully extrajudicial killings.

In **Kazakhstan**, the political opposition faced government harassment via politically motivated criminal charges and restrictions on freedom of assembly. The government continued to harass independent and opposition-oriented media outlets and journalists. At year's end, the government was considering amendments to laws governing political parties, media, and elections. Some civil society representatives and opposition parties criticized the process as lacking transparency. The government was also considering amendments to the religion law that, if enacted, would represent a serious step backward for religious freedom.

Although **Kyrgyzstan** has a vibrant civil society and independent media, in the past year the government increasingly sought to control various aspects of civil life. New laws or amendments placed restrictions on public assembly, religious freedom, and media. In October, the National Television and Radio Network took Radio Free Liberty/Radio Europe off the air, reducing the public's access to this independent source of information. The Central Election Commission chairwoman fled the country after claiming she had been pressured by the president's son over registering an opposition candidate for October local council elections.

Nepal became a federal democratic republic shortly after national elections in April produced the most diverse legislature in the country's history. Although there were reports of political violence, intimidation, and voting irregularities, observers reported that the elections reflected the will of the people. Violence, extortion, and intimidation continued throughout the year; and impunity for human rights violators, threats against the media, arbitrary arrest, and lengthy pretrial detention were serious problems. Members of the Maoists, the Maoist-affiliated Young Communist League, and other small, often ethnically based armed groups committed numerous grave human rights abuses. Such abuses included arbitrary and unlawful use of lethal force, torture, and abduction. Several armed groups, largely in the Terai region, attacked civilians, government officials, members of particular ethnic groups, each other, or Maoists.

Pakistan returned to civilian democratic rule during the year. Opposition parties prevailed in February parliamentary elections and formed a coalition government. The coalition lasted only part of the year though the government remains in power. In September, Asif Ali Zardari, widower of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, succeeded Pervez Musharraf as president. The new government put back on the bench under a new oath five of the 13

Supreme Court judges Musharraf deposed during the November 2007 state of emergency, while three retired or resigned. The chief of army staff withdrew 3,000 army officers from civilian government posts they held during Musharraf's tenure. Despite these positive steps, the human rights situation remained poor. Military operations in the country's northwest killed approximately 1,150 civilians, militant attacks in that region killed 825 more civilians, sectarian violence in the country killed an estimated 1,125 persons, and suicide bombings killed more than 970 individuals. Ongoing battles with militants left approximately 200,000 persons displaced at year's end.

In **Sri Lanka**, the democratically elected government's respect for human rights declined as armed conflict escalated in the country's 25-year civil war. By year's end, there was little movement on political inclusion of minorities and they continued to suffer the majority of human rights abuses, such as killings and disappearances. The government expelled most international humanitarian assistance providers from the northern conflict zone. Although the government took initial steps to address the use of child soldiers by progovernment militias, the problem was not resolved. The government failed to investigate and prosecute any security forces for human rights violations and to implement constitutional provisions that would provide oversight of government institutions. Civil society was intimidated and independent media and journalists came under particular pressure through attacks and threats from pro-government actors.

Although there were modest improvements, the government of **Turkmenistan** continued to commit serious abuses and its human rights record remained poor. Political and civil liberties continued to be severely restricted. In June authorities arrested former activist and former political prisoner Gulgeldy Annaniyazov after he allegedly reentered the country illegally and sentenced him in a closed trial to 11 years in prison. December parliamentary elections fell far short of international standards. The government continued its effort to revise laws, including its constitution, to bring them into conformity with relevant international conventions.

The Government of **Uzbekistan** took steps to address human rights concerns such as defendants' rights, trafficking in persons, and child labor in the cotton industry. However, serious human rights abuses continued and torture remained systemic in law enforcement. Authorities compelled many children to pick cotton, at times under poor living conditions. Human rights activists and journalists who criticized the government continued to be

subjected to harassment, arbitrary arrest, politically motivated prosecution, and torture.

Western Hemisphere

Governments in the region continued to address past human rights abuses by working to ensure justice for victims and to end impunity. In Colombia, a number of commanding officers were under investigation for gross human rights violations. The Prosecutor General's Office was investigating 27 military officials, including three generals and four colonels, dismissed from the Armed Forces in late October for their alleged involvement in the murder of 11 youths from Soacha, near Bogotá. Several investigations continued in Chile and Argentina, and a number of judgments were handed down in cases related to abuses of the 1970s and 1980s. In Peru, the state continued prosecutions against former president Fujimori and other former government officials for corruption and serious human rights abuses. Forensic anthropology teams exhumed the remains and began identifying the bodies of hundreds of persons forcibly disappeared or massacred and buried in clandestine graves during the 1980s and 1990s. The UN-led Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala continued its investigation of 15 high-profile human rights cases involving femicide, killings of bus drivers, trafficking in persons, and attacks against and killings of trade unionists and human rights defenders.

In general, electoral institutions throughout the Western Hemisphere maintained the independence and rigor they have gained in recent years. Various electoral processes, such as the presidential election in Paraguay, the presidential primary in Honduras, and referendums in Bolivia and Ecuador, were judged generally free and fair. There were exceptions, however. In Nicaragua, the municipal elections were marred by widespread fraud, intimidation, and violence. In Venezuela, the comptroller general declared nearly 300 (mostly opposition) mayoral and gubernatorial candidates ineligible to run due to administrative infractions.

In some cases governments used democratic processes, such as constitutional referendums, to pursue policies that threatened to undermine democratic freedoms and institutions, reduce checks and balances, or consolidate power in the executive branch. In Ecuador, the 2008 Constitution contains provisions requiring media to provide the government free airtime, prompting concerns that freedom of speech and press will be affected. In Venezuela, the passage of 26 "enabling" laws, some of which reflect aspects of the failed 2007 constitutional referendum, feature clauses

that reduce the scope of authority of elected officials, and promote centralization of power.

There were threats to press freedom. In Venezuela, independent media outlets and journalists continued to be subjected to public harassment and intimidation by high-ranking government officials on state-owned media, and the independent Venezuelan television station Globovision was the target of a tear gas attack by pro-government supporters. The Nicaraguan government used administrative, judicial, and financial measures to undermine the exercise of freedom of speech. Although Bolivia's government generally respected press freedom, it maintained an antagonistic relationship with the press. Several NGOs alleged that President Morales and government officials made disparaging statements regarding the press, condoning violence against journalists and media outlets, politicizing state-produced media content, and promulgating laws designed to restrict independent media.

Cuba continued to be the hemisphere's only totalitarian state after an undemocratic transfer of power from Fidel Castro to his brother, Raul.

Selected Country Developments

In **Bolivia**, government efforts to bring a controversial new constitution to a national referendum, opposition claims for greater regional autonomy, and competing demands for government funds led to a series of violent confrontations and large-scale road blockades. The violence peaked in September in Pando Department with 13 deaths and the illegal, prolonged detainment of the governor. In May and June, eastern departments held autonomy referenda, which the federal government refused to recognize and the international community declined to monitor. A nationwide recall referendum in August left most prefects (governors) and President Evo Morales in office, strengthening the president's Movement Toward Socialism party and its efforts to hold a national vote on a new constitution.

Against the backdrop of its 44-year armed conflict with terrorist organizations, the government of **Colombia** continued efforts to improve human rights, particularly in implementing its Justice and Peace Law, a process that has helped clarify approximately 164 thousand crimes and led to reform of the military justice system. During the first 10 months of the year, killings decreased by 6 percent and kidnappings by 14 percent compared with 2007, while investigations of links between politicians and paramilitary groups implicated 70 congressmen

and 15 governors, a number of whom have been imprisoned. Nonetheless, numerous societal problems and governmental human rights abuses persisted, including unlawful killings, insubordinate-military collaboration with illegal armed groups, and harassment of journalists and human rights groups. Terrorist organizations, notably the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the National Liberation Army, committed serious human rights abuses, including political and other killings, kidnappings, massive forced displacements, recruitment of child soldiers, and attacks against human rights activists, teachers, and trade unionists.

In **Cuba**, there was an increase in suppression of freedom of speech and of assembly compared to the previous year. Harassment of dissidents intensified, including the beating of activists by security officials or government-organized mobs. The government also increased its use of brief detainments and subsequent release without charges to intimidate activists and prevent them from organizing. At least 219 political prisoners remained imprisoned in squalid and life-threatening conditions, which included beatings and denial of medical treatment. Those released during the year had served their full sentences. The government continued to restrict citizens' access to independent information, and in particular sought to restrict Internet access, despite permitting individual citizens to own personal computers for the first time.

Guatemala made efforts to improve its human rights situation. The UN-led Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala continued its investigation of high-profile human rights cases and expanded its investigative capacity through the creation of a new unit of prosecutors. However, there continued to be widespread violence and impunity. Members of the national police committed unlawful killings, and in many cases authorities transferred individual police officers or dismissed them rather than investigate and prosecute alleged wrongdoers. Other violence stemmed from gang incidents, sexual assault, extortion, organized crime, and narcotics trafficking. Trade unionists were threatened with violence or killed by unknown assailants. Government corruption remained a serious issue, with public surveys indicating a lack of confidence in nearly all governmental institutions.

Nicaragua's ruling Sandinista government excluded credible international observers from the November municipal elections, which were marred by widespread fraud, irregularities, and intimidation. The country continued to suffer from lack of respect for the rule of law, systemic corruption, and

politicization of the judiciary and other government organs. The government and other actors intimidated and harassed journalists and civil society groups that did not support official policies.

In **Venezuela**, the NGO community noted an erosion of both democratic and human rights, with potentially severe consequences. During the year, the National Assembly passed 26 laws that featured clauses reducing the scope of authority of elected officials and promoting centralization of power. The government drew international criticism and accusations of unconstitutionality by declaring 272 candidates for municipal and gubernatorial elections ineligible to run; the majority of these were opposition candidates. President Chavez declared his intention to establish another constitutional referendum--on February 15, 2009--that would again attempt to abolish term limits for the president, and for the first time for all elected officials. There were numerous and substantive hindrances and threats to freedom of expression, including media freedom. Government officials publicly harassed and intimidated independent media outlets and journalists on state-owned media. The government sued an independent Venezuelan television station, alleging that the network had promoted the assassination of President Chavez. Individuals and media networks also were accused of fomenting violence and destabilizing the government after they made statements that were critical of, or urged action in opposition to, the government. Government institutions and officials and government-affiliated media outlets promoted anti-Semitism through numerous anti-Semitic comments, which had a spillover effect into society, taking the form of anti-Semitic expression, caricatures, vandalism, and other physical attacks against Jewish institutions.

Conclusion

December 10, 2008, marked the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly. In the decades since the Declaration's adoption, there have been remarkable gains on every continent for the rights it enumerates. Still, 60 years later, hundreds of millions of people are denied fundamental freedoms by their governments.

The United States is a country founded on human rights and the rule of law. In publishing these reports, we seek to be a source of information, hope and help to people everywhere who are oppressed, silenced, and marginalized. We are inalterably committed to working at all levels -- national, regional, and

global -- to ensure that the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration are protected and respected.

Introduction to the 2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

The year just ended was characterized by three trends: a growing worldwide demand for greater personal and political freedom, governmental efforts to push back on those freedoms, and further confirmation that human rights flourish best in participatory democracies with vibrant civil societies.

These congressionally mandated reports describe the performance in 2008 of governments across the globe in putting into practice their international commitments on human rights. We hope that they will help focus attention on human rights abuses and bring action to end them. At the same time, we hope that the hard-won advances for human freedom chronicled in the reports will hearten those still pressing for their rights, often against daunting odds.

These reports will inform U.S. government policymaking and serve as a reference for other governments, intergovernmental institutions, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), human rights defenders, and journalists. United States foreign policy revolves not only around effective defense, but also robust diplomacy and vigorous support for political and economic development. A vigorous human rights policy reaffirms American values and advances our national interests. As President Obama stated in his inaugural address: "America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman, and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity...", but to "those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."

Since the days of our own nation's founding, we have endeavored to correct injustices and fully promote respect for fundamental freedoms for all of our citizens. These efforts have been spurred and sustained by an accountable, democratic system of government, the rule of law, a vibrant free media, and, most important of all, the civic activism of our citizenry.

As we publish these reports, the Department of State remains mindful of both domestic and international scrutiny of the United States' record. As President Obama recently made clear, "we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals." We do not consider views about our performance voiced by others in the international community--whether by other governments or nongovernmental actors--to be interference in our internal affairs, nor should other governments regard expressions about their performance as such. We and all other sovereign nations have international obligations to respect the universal human rights and freedoms of our citizens, and it is the responsibility of others to speak out when they believe those obligations are not being fulfilled.

The U.S. government will continue to hear and reply forthrightly to concerns about our own practices. We will continue to submit reports to international bodies in accordance with our

obligations under various human rights treaties to which we are a party. United States laws, policies, and practices have evolved considerably in recent years, and will continue to do so. For example, on January 22, 2009, President Obama signed three executive orders to close the detention facilities at Guantanamo and review U.S. government policies on detention and interrogation.

We drew the information contained in these reports from governments and multilateral institutions, from national and international nongovernmental groups, and from academics, jurists, religious groups, and the media. The reports have gone through a lengthy process of fact checking to ensure high standards of accuracy and objectivity. Each country report speaks for itself. However, some broad, cross-cutting observations can be drawn.

One: In 2008, pushback against demands for greater personal and political freedom continued in many countries across the globe. A disturbing number of countries imposed burdensome, restrictive, or repressive laws and regulations against NGOs and the media, including the Internet. Many courageous human rights defenders who peacefully pressed for their own rights and those of their fellow countrymen and women were harassed, threatened, arrested and imprisoned, killed, or were subjected to violent extrajudicial means of reprisal.

Two: Human rights abuses remain a symptom of deeper dysfunctions within political systems. The most serious human rights abuses tended to occur in countries where unaccountable rulers wielded unchecked power or there was government failure or collapse, often exacerbated or caused by internal or external conflict.

Three: Healthy political systems are far more likely to respect human rights. Countries in which human rights were most protected and respected were characterized by the following electoral, institutional, and societal elements:

Free and fair electoral processes that include not only a clean casting and honest counting of ballots on election day, but also a run-up to the voting that allows for real competition and full respect for the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association;

Representative, accountable, transparent, democratic institutions of government, including independent judiciaries, under the rule of law to ensure that leaders who win elections democratically also govern democratically, and are responsive to the will and needs of the people; and

Vibrant civil societies, including independent NGOs and free media.

To be sure, even in countries where these elements were present human rights abuses at times occurred. Democratic elections can be marred with irregularities. There can be abuses of power and miscarriages of justice. States having weak institutions of democratic government and struggling economies can fall far

short of meeting the needs and expectations of their people for a better life. Corruption can undermine public trust. Long-marginalized segments of populations in some countries have yet to enjoy full participation in the life of their nations. Insecurity due to internal and/or cross-border conflict can hinder respect for and retard progress in human rights. But when these electoral, institutional and societal elements obtain, the prospects are far greater for problems to be addressed, correctives to be applied and improvements to be made. Taken together, these three trends confirm the continuing need for vigorous United States diplomacy to act and speak out against human rights abuses, at the same time that our country carefully reviews its own performance. These trends further confirm the need to combine diplomacy with creative strategies that can help to develop healthy political systems and support civil society. Below, readers will find overviews highlighting key trends in each geographic region. Each of the regional overviews is followed by thumbnail sketches of selected countries (ordered alphabetically) that were chosen for notable developments--positive, negative, or mixed--chronicled during calendar year 2008. For more comprehensive, detailed information, we refer you to the individual country reports themselves.