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Saudi Arabia

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy ruled by the Al Saud family with a population of 22.7 million, including 6.1 million foreigners. Since August 2005 King Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud has ruled as custodian of Islam's two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina. The government bases its legitimacy in governance according to its interpretation of Islamic law (Shari'a) and the 1992 Basic Law. The Basic Law sets out the system of government, rights of citizens, the powers and duties of the government, and provides that the Koran and the Traditions (*Sunna*) of the Prophet Muhammad serve as the country's constitution. The only elected representatives were half of the municipal counselors, elected by men in December 2005 on a nonparty basis. The civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces.

The following significant human rights problems were reported: no right to peacefully change the government; infliction of severe pain by judicially sanctioned corporal punishments; beatings and other abuses; inadequate prison and detention center conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention, sometimes incommunicado; denial of fair public trials; exemption from the rule of law for some individuals and lack of judicial independence; arbitrary interference with privacy, family, home, and correspondence; and significant restriction of civil liberties--freedoms of speech and press, including the Internet; assembly; association; and movement. The government committed severe violations of religious freedom. There was a widespread perception of serious corruption and a lack of government transparency, as well as legal and societal discrimination and violence against women. Other religious, ethnic, and minority groups faced discrimination. There were strict limitations on worker rights, especially for foreign workers.

There was greater involvement in government activities by the *Majlis Al-Shura* (the Consultative Council) and the 178 municipal councils. Despite increased public and media discourse about human rights, the overall human rights environment remained poor.

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; however, the government executed persons for criminal offenses after closed trials, making it impossible to assess whether legal protections were applied (see section 1.e.). The country's highest court, the Supreme Judicial Council, is responsible for reviewing cases involving sentences of stoning, amputation, or death, and sentences can only be enforced pursuant to a royal decree issued by the king.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

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; however, there were reports that some authorities practiced physical abuse and torture.

The government reserved its position on Article 20 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and does not recognize the jurisdiction of the Committee against Torture to investigate allegations of systematic torture.

Ministry of Interior (MOI) officials were responsible for most alleged incidents of physical abuse and torture of prisoners, including beatings, lashings, and suspension from bars by handcuffs. According to a 2005 report by the international nongovernmental organization (NGO), Amnesty International (AI), these practices were used to force confessions from prisoners. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), a former prisoner in Mecca general prison alleged that prison guards regularly abused him during his time in prison between 2002 and the end of the year by beating him, burning his back on a hot metal block, and keeping him in solitary confinement for six months.

During the year the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, known as the religious police (*Mutawwa'in*) harassed, abused, and detained citizens and foreigners of both sexes. These incidents were most common in the central region, including the capital of Riyadh, and relatively less frequent in the eastern and western regions of the country. However, there was an increase in reported religious police abuse in the Eastern Province and Jeddah.

The government sentenced criminals to punishment according to its interpretation of Shari'a. Corporal punishments provided by law included public execution by beheading, amputation, lashing, and other measures deemed appropriate by the judicial authorities. According to HRW, judges routinely issued sentences of thousands of lashes as punishment, often carried out in public. HRW reported that the beatings lead to severe mental trauma and physical pain, and the victims do not receive medical treatment.

During the year the press reported approximately 38 executions. The government executes individuals who have been convicted of murder, apostasy, narcotics-related offenses, rape, and armed robbery. Twenty of these executions were for crimes related to illegal drugs. There were no executions for apostasy during the year. The authorities punished repeated thievery and other repeated offenses by amputation of the right hand and left foot. The government also punished people for various offenses with lashings, including for alcohol-related offenses or for being alone in the company of an unrelated person of the opposite sex. According to press reports, lashings were generally administered with a thin reed by a man who must hold a book under his arm to prevent him from lifting the arm too high. The strokes, delivered through a thin shirt, are not supposed to leave permanent damage but are designed to leave painful welts that bleed and bruise. According to the NGO National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), there were unauthorized and excessive lashings in the women's prisons.

On September 9, a Nigerian man had his right hand amputated after he was convicted of stealing in the Great Mosque in Mecca. He was found guilty of "committing the crime of pickpocketing."

On November 1, a Nigerian woman was executed in Jeddah for smuggling drugs into the country. Similarly, on November 1, a male citizen was executed in Riyadh for the same crime.

On January 23, the media reported that Naif Al-Otaibipardoned Puthen Veetil Abdul Lateef Naushad, an Indian citizen, for his role in a fight allegedly blinding Al-Otaibi in one of his eyes. Due to the pardon, Naushad's right eye was not gouged out as punishment. Naushad had served three years in prison for this assault.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Conditions at prisons and detention centers were generally acceptable, according to international standards. However, there were some prisons with below-acceptable standards in hygiene, food, medical, and social services, and prolonged detention of prisoners in poor health. Many jails remained overcrowded, and some detainees were allowed family visits only after a significant period of time after their initial incarceration. The government permitted visits to detention centers and prisons in accordance with international modalities. These visits were made by the Human Rights Commission (HRC) and NSHR, an NGO originally endowed by King Fahd. The HRC visited three prisons in the Eastern Province.

The NSHR visited and reported abuses in 18 prisons, including four women's prisons. It found that pretrial detainees were held together with convicted prisoners. NSHR reported that drug abuse is increasing inside at least one prison. There were reports that nonviolent criminals (e.g., debtors) were held in the same facilities as violent criminals. NSHR also reported unauthorized and exaggerated lashings in the women's prisons, as well as the mixing of HIV positive with HIV negative inmates. At the prison in Mecca for noncitizens, NSHR found inadequate sleeping facilities, inadequate provision of medical services, and a nonfunctioning air conditioning system.

On November 27, HRW made its first official visit, in addition to an unofficial visit in February, to the country in four years with the intent of visiting specific detention and prison facilities and specific detainees and prisoners. While HRW visited four prisons, it was not allowed to visit all of the prisons and all of the prisoners it requested. HRW visited a small group of prisoners on November 30 at the Al-Ha'ir correction facility south of Riyadh, but the delegation's attempt to return and revisit the facility on December 2 was blocked.

There were also reports that consular visits to noncitizens were restricted.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The Basic Law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and limits the period of arrest to five days without charges being filed; however, ambiguities in implementation of the law and lack of due process give the interior minister broad powers to detain persons indefinitely. In practice, persons were held weeks or months and sometimes longer.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The king, the interior minister, the defense minister, and the national guard commander have responsibility in law and in practice for law enforcement and maintenance of order. King Abdullah remained in command of the National Guard. Crown Prince Sultan remained the defense and aviation minister with responsibility over all of that ministry's armed forces. The interior minister, Prince Naif, exercised control over government internal security forces, the internal security service or secret police (*Mabahith*), and border forces. Prince Muqrin was appointed secretary-general of the General Intelligence Presidency (GIP), which has its own forces. The religious police constitute a semiautonomous agency, reporting to the king via the Royal *Diwan* (the king's royal court). The MOI also has undefined oversight role of the religious police. The religious police monitor public behavior to enforce strict adherence to conservative Islamic norms. The media reported the government arrested and punished police and border guards involved in smuggling and corruption.

Arrest and Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and limits the period of arrest; however, in practice, persons were held weeks, months, and sometimes longer, and the law gives the interior minister broad powers to detain persons indefinitely. The regular police, the secret police, and the religious police can arrest and detain persons.

There were reports the authorities arrested and detained persons without following explicit legal guidelines. The religious police intimidated, harassed, and arrested persons based on their own religious interpretations of "crimes of vice" including arrests for "witchcraft" and "sorcery" (see section 2.c.). These instances included men with "strange" haircuts or wearing improper clothes (see section 1.f.), men

tailoring or taking measurements of women for women's clothes, and men dressing in female clothing (see section 5).

The 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. Throughout the country, several Committees for Collection of Donations for Impoverished Prisoners raised funds to pay fines stemming from traffic accidents and civil cases because prisoners remain in custody until the fines are paid, regardless of length of sentence. There were also reports the king and other members of the royal family paid fines on behalf of nonviolent prisoners to enable their release.

If accused persons were not released, authorities typically detained them for two months before sending the case to trial or, in the case of some foreigners, summarily deporting them. There were no established procedures providing detainees the right to inform their family of their arrest. There were no established procedures providing for appeal of deportation.

By royal decree, the religious police have the authority to detain persons for no more than 24 hours for violations of the strict standards of proper dress and behavior; however, they often exceeded this limit before delivering detainees to the police (see section 1.f.).

The religious police generally complied with the requirement that a police officer accompany them at the time of an arrest; however, there were cases in which religious police detained persons without the presence of a police officer. During the year in the more conservative Nejd region that includes Riyadh, reports continued of religious police accosting, abusing, arresting, and detaining citizens and noncitizens, especially women, for allegedly violating dress and behavior standards. There were also a number of reports of religious police in Mecca taking similar actions. The risk of harassment was substantial. The religious police detained men for offenses that included eating in restaurants with women not related to them, making lewd remarks to women in shopping malls, following cars lawfully transporting women, or walking in groups through family-only sections of shopping centers. Young unmarried men are prohibited from entering most shopping malls. Religious police detained women of many nationalities for actions such as riding in a taxi with a man who was not her relative, appearing with her head uncovered in shopping malls, and eating in restaurants with males who were not her relatives. Many such detainees were held for days, sometimes weeks, without officials notifying families or, in the case of noncitizens, embassies.

According to a December 23 press report, the religious police beat up a mother and her daughter's driver, abducted the women using their car, then abandoned the women, who were locked in the trunk of the car after the car broke down. The religious police claimed the women had been visiting male friends and accused them of promiscuity. At year's end the courts had not yet decided on the women's suit against the religious police.

In spite of the law, although to a lesser extent than in the past, the religious police continued to raid private religious ceremonies, notably arresting and detaining Christians as well as the Ahmadiyya religious group (see section 2.c.).

On December 29, the religious police raided a gathering for food and prayer involving members of the Ahmadiyya religious group**.** Authorities consider them "non-Muslim" and heretical. Reportedly, the religious police detained 49 members, including approximately 19 women and children and 14 youths. Of the 49 individuals, there were 25 Indians, 23 Pakistanis, and one Syrian. At year's end, all 49 remained in police custody.

The authorities may detain without charge, or charge with attempting to destabilize the government, persons who publicly criticize the government (see sections 2.a. and 3).

Political detainees arrested by the internal security service were reportedly held incommunicado in special prisons during the initial phase of the investigation. This period may last weeks or months under the MOI's broad legal authority. Access to detainees by family or lawyers was restricted.

The government continued to discriminate against and detain members of the Shi'a Muslim minority. Government security forces, mostly religious police, reportedly arrested Shi'a based on scant suspicion, held them in custody for lengthy periods, and subsequently released them without explanation.

Citizens can report abuses by security forces at any police station; however, no information was publicly available regarding how complaints are handled.

Amnesty

The government continued its tradition of pardoning or granting amnesty to more than 9,000 prisoners on special occasions, including holy days and during Ramadan. The government temporarily released prisoners on special occasions so they could visit family; some were permanently released. On October 12, according to HRW, the government released 700 detainees who were not involved in terrorist acts but had been suspected of harboring extremist thoughts.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Basic Law provides for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence in practice. Members of the royal family were not required to appear before the courts, and their associates have influenced judges. The Supreme Judicial Council, whose members are appointed by the king, appoints, transfers, and removes judges. The Ministry of Justice disciplines judges. The Basic Law allows for a public trial; however, most trials were closed to the public. Juries are not used. Despite 2002 laws providing for suspects' rights to legal counsel and requiring public trials, most trials reportedly were held in secret and without defense lawyers.

There are two types of courts: Shari'a and special. Special courts include commercial courts. The legal system is based on the government's interpretation of Islamic law in all courts. Courts exercise jurisdiction over common criminal cases and civil suits regarding marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Their jurisdiction extends to non-Muslims for crimes committed in the country. Cases involving relatively small penalties were tried in summary courts. More serious crimes are adjudicated in courts of common pleas from which appeals may be made to the courts of appeal.

Other civil proceedings, such as those involving claims against the government and enforcement of foreign judgments, were held before various specialized administrative tribunals including the Commission for the Settlement of Labor Disputes. The Board of Grievances hears complaints against government actions, including against the religious police. Plaintiffs have won their cases against government actions in these tribunals and have been able to enforce foreign judgments.

The government continued to reorganize the judiciary to improve administration of justice. Businessmen complained courts were ineffective and slow, court procedures were not well established, and that judges possessed religious rather than legal training. They also complained that judges often acted capriciously and did not base judgments on precedent, leading to widely divergent rulings.

The government permitted Shi'a to use their own legal tradition to adjudicate cases involving domestic issues, inheritance, and Islamic endowments. However, there were only two courts and two Shi'a judges. The two courts, one in Al-Hasa and the other in Qatif, handled cases of Shi'a family law. These courts did not have adequate resources to serve the large Shi'a population in the Eastern Province. Either party in a dispute can appeal the Shi'a court's decision to a Shari'a (Sunni) court based on Hanbali jurisprudence.

There was no comparable right for non-Muslims or foreigners; cases of non-Muslims and foreigners were handled in Shari'a courts.

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 courts-martial.

According to the justice ministry, judges are free to base their decisions on any of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence. In practice, judges usually follow Hanbali jurisprudence.

The Supreme Judicial Council may not reverse decisions made by courts of appeal; however, the Council may review lower-court decisions and refer them back to a lower court for reconsideration.

The Council of Senior Religious Scholars (*Ulema*) is an autonomous advisory body of 20 senior religious jurists, including the minister of justice, which interprets Shari'a thereby establishing the legal principles to guide lower-court judges.

Trial Procedures

The Criminal Procedure Law provides persons under investigation the right to a lawyer and permits lawyers to present arguments in criminal courts. The law also provides that convicted persons be informed of their right to appeal rulings.

A woman's testimony does not carry the same weight as a man. In a Shari'a court, the testimony of one man equals that of two women. Under the Hanbali interpretation of Shari'a, judges may discount the testimony of persons who are nonpracticing Muslims or who do not adhere to Hanbali doctrine. Legal sources reported that testimony by Shi'a 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--a situation that has led prosecuting authorities to coerce confessions from suspects by threats and abuse (see section 1.c.).

Laws and regulations state that defendants should be treated equally; however, sentencing was not uniform and crimes against Muslims received harsher penalties than those against non-Muslims. In wrongful death cases, the amount of indemnity or "blood money" awarded to relatives varied with the nationality, religion, age, and sex of the victim. A sentence may be changed at any stage of review, except for punishments stipulated by the Koran.

Islamic law considers Hindus to be polytheists and on this basis justifies discrimination in calculating accidental death or injury compensation. According to the country's 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 receive one-sixteenth of the amount a Muslim male receives. Women receive 50 percent of what men receive in each of these categories.

Provincial governors, all of whom were members of the royal family, 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. In general, members of the royal family and other powerful families were not subject to the same rule of law as ordinary citizens.

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.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

According to press accounts, Deputy Minister of the Interior Prince Ahmad bin Abdul Aziz said the kingdom did not imprison persons on political grounds, but because they were terrorists or collaborators with terrorists or had violated Shari'a or civil regulations. The government did not provide information regarding political prisoners or detainees or respond to inquiries concerning political prisoners. The government conducted closed trials for persons who may have been political prisoners or detainees and in other cases has detained persons incommunicado for long periods while under investigation.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The Basic Law provides for an independent and impartial judiciary in civil matters. There were reports of lawsuits seeking damages for, or

cessation of, human rights violations. There were administrative and judicial remedies available for alleged violations. There were reports of problems enforcing domestic court orders, primarily when a foreigner won a judgment against a citizen.

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 obtain a warrant prior to searching a residence, or a court order prior to perusing personal correspondence and documents. The government generally respected this inviolability; however, there were some cases in which the government infringed on these rights, notably religious police raids on private residences. Royal decrees include provisions for the government to defend the home from unlawful intrusions, while laws and regulations prohibit officials from intercepting mail and electronic communications except when necessary during criminal investigations. The police generally must demonstrate reasonable cause and obtain permission from a provincial governor before searching a private home.

Despite these 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. There were far fewer reports that some customs officials arbitrarily confiscated or censored materials including Christian Bibles and religious videotapes (see section 2.c.). The authorities also opened mail and used informants and wiretaps in internal security and criminal matters. Informants and, in some districts, an informal system of ward bosses reported "seditious ideas," antigovernment activity, or "behavior contrary to Islam" in their neighborhoods to the MOI.

The government enforced most social and Islamic religious norms. Citizens have the right to sue to enforce these laws. For example, citizens sued to dissolve "unequal" marriages between tribal and nontribal individuals or between tribal members in which the status of one tribe was perceived to be superior to another. Citizens also sued to punish those who "insulted Saudi values and norms." Women may not marry noncitizens without government permission; men must obtain government permission to marry noncitizen women outside the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In accordance with Shari'a, women are prohibited from marrying non-Muslims; men may marry Christians and Jews, as well as Muslims (see section 2.c.). The government does not refuse marriage licenses between Sunni and Shi'a couples; tradition and culture, not law, restrict marriages between Sunni and Shi'a citizens.

According to the law, men who work in certain government positions, such as the military, cannot marry noncitizens, although exceptions are made in practice. The government subjects top civil servants and security officials to extensive questioning when applying to marry foreigners. In response to certain cultural norms, the government was more lenient when approving marriages of foreigners to elderly and disabled citizens. The marital restrictions also applied to citizens studying overseas on government scholarships. Violators risked disciplinary action; however, this policy was frequently violated, and there were no reports of sanctions being imposed.

Religious police practices and incidents of abuse varied widely. According to an official report, during the year there were 3,227 field officers working in 1,310 centers in all 13 provinces. They reported 390,117 incidents involving 402,725 persons of which only 101,143 were citizens. The religious police referred 6.4 percent of these incidents to the regular police and the courts. In certain areas, the religious police and freelance religious vigilantes harassed, abused, arrested, and detained citizens and foreigners (see section 1.d.).

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.

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. According to the Basic Law, the media's role is to educate the masses and promote national unity. Media outlets can be banned if they promote mischief and discord, compromise the security of the state and its public image, or offend man's dignity and rights. The government continued to restrict freedom of speech and press and censored articles critical of the royal family or Islam. The authorities routinely censored foreign print sources. However, during the year, there was regular discussion in the media of social, economic, and political issues previously considered taboo such as reform, trafficking in persons, prostitution, homosexuality, the religious establishment, women's rights, and human rights.

The print media were censored and privately owned; some had close ties to members of the royal family. Journalists practiced self-censorship by refraining from direct criticism of government officials. A media policy statement and a national security law prohibit the dissemination of criticism of the royal family and the government. The government media policy statement urged journalists to uphold Islam, oppose atheism, promote Arab interests, and preserve cultural heritage. The Ministry of Information must approve the appointment of, and may remove, all senior editors. The government also provided guidelines to newspapers regarding controversial issues. The government-owned Saudi Press Agency expressed official government views. All newspapers in the country must be licensed by the government. With a license, newspapers are allowed to carry government advertisements which accounted for the largest sources of revenue for the newspapers.

The Saudi Journalist Association was founded in 2004 under a government charter granted in 2003. Membership was voluntary and open to both men and women. Noncitizen journalists working in the kingdom were eligible to join as nonvoting members. The organization's board of directors, which was elected in 2004, had nine members, including two women. At year's end the organization was inactive.

Authorities continued to ban government employees from criticizing the government. The government enforced existing laws based on Article 12 of the Basic Law that provides the state with the authority to "prevent anything that may lead to disunity, sedition, and separation." Accordingly, 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."

Newspapers routinely investigated and published stories on crime and terrorism. Two London-based Arabic dailies, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat*, continued to be owned by members of the royal family and were widely distributed and read in the country. Both newspapers practiced self-censorship.

According to HRW, in June the secret police arrested Sa'ad bin Zu'air for 20 days for saying in an interview on Al-Arabiya television that the death of Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi was "sad for most Muslims."

In December 2005 a new youth-focused paper appeared on domestic newsstands, called *Al-Shams* (The Sun). Printed in Bahrain, the paper is sold with tacit approval of the government. Initially, the paper had only limited success, until it published the controversial Danish cartoons and was briefly shut down. On March 21, *Al-Shams* reappeared after a new editor in chief, Khalaf Al-Harbi, was appointed, and its success continued. The newspaper pledged to staunchly advocate the rights of young persons in the country for whom education, jobs, social services, and freedoms were key concerns.

The government owned and operated most domestic television and radio companies. Government censors removed any reference in foreign programs and songs to politics, religions other than Islam, pork or pigs, alcohol, and sex.

On August 4, award-winning writer and women's rights activist, Wajiha Al-Howaider, was arrested on the causeway to Bahrain because she was holding a sign that read, "Give women their rights." She was released with a warning. On September 20, she was summoned and interrogated for six hours by the secret police for planning a peaceful protest on September 23, national day, by women demanding their rights. The secret police threatened her with the loss of her job at Saudi Aramco. Al-Howaider was released only after she signed a written pledge to cease human rights activities in the kingdom, including writing articles, organizing protests, and talking to the media. She was not allowed to leave the country for her home in Bahrain until September 28.

On September 27, the Court of Grievances dismissed the charges against the author of the popular novel, "Girls of Riyadh." A group of citizens filed charges against the author because she allegedly slandered society by writing a novel about socially unacceptable behavior by female citizens.

During the year the Consultative Council continued partial, delayed television coverage of its proceedings and allowed journalists to attend sessions.

Although technically illegal, there were several million satellite-receiving dishes in the country, which 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 banned books, magazines, and other materials that it considered sexual or pornographic. The Ministry of Information compiled and updated a list of publications prohibited from being sold in the country.

Internet Freedom

The government restricted access to the Internet, and there were reports that the government monitored e-mail and Internet chat rooms. However, within limits, individuals and groups could engage in the peaceful expression of views via the Internet, including by electronic mail. The government blocked access to Internet Web sites deemed sexual, pornographic, politically offensive, "un-Islamic", or disruptive because of controversial religious and political content.

Access to the Internet was available through local government-monitored servers. There were as many as one million Internet subscribers. Some citizens circumvented controls by accessing the Internet through servers in other countries. The government had a process through which citizens could request reconsideration of a decision to block a particular Web site, and authorities reportedly at least partially unblocked some Web sites.

On October 9, the Consultative Council approved the country's first law to combat electronic crimes such as defamation on the Internet, hacking, unauthorized access to government Web sites, and stealing information related to national security.

On March 10, Mohsen Al-Awajy was arrested for criticizing the king's alleged heavy reliance on the advice of liberals on the Web site Wassatyah.com. On March 21, he was released after the NGO Reporters Without Borders petitioned for his release.

On April 4, Rabah El-Queay, a 23-year-old journalist of A*l-Shams***,** was arrested in relation to content he posted on online forums using his real name. Prior to his arrest, El-Queay was involved in a car accident, allegedly part of the continuing harassment he endured because of his postings. The official investigation into the accident indicated that El-Queay was at fault because his writings had driven good men to harass him.

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. Some professors believed informants monitored their classroom comments and reported to government and religious authorities.

The government continued to restrict cultural events. Citing a 2003 royal decree that stated the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue obviates the need for individual cultural forums, the government closed Shi'a and Sunni cultural forums in the area of al-Ahsa in the Eastern Province. Cultural forums, particularly in Qatif, continue to operate. The government does not allow movie theaters and restricted the public showing of films. Public performance of plays and music were allowed if they are traditional and part of a special event.

According to HRW, conservatives including the religious police harassed visitors and authors, especially women, at the February Riyadh

International Book Fair, which displayed a Bible and works by banned author Turki Al-Hamad for the first time.

Starting on July 12, for four weeks the Jeddah Visual Shows Festival held the country's first film festival which showed 16 films, including documentaries, short-subjects, and one animated feature. Eight movies were domestic productions, seven were from the United Arab Emirates, and one was from Kuwait. The public forum was open to men and women. Cinemas have been banned since the 1980s.

On July 30, a fiction group at the Riyadh Literary Club organized a discussion that featured the showing of two domestic short-subjects from the Jeddah Visual Shows Festival. This screening was allegedly the first of its kind in Riyadh, and was attended by 40 males and the two male directors of the films.

On November 27, *Al Riyadh*, *Al Hayat,* and *Al Watan* reported that a "group of extremists" (ultra-conservatives) raided the theater, disturbed an audience, and forcibly ended a play at Al Yamamah College. The play was "A Moderate Who Lacks Moderation," by Ahmad Al-Eissa, president of Al Yamamah College. Security forces intervened to end clashes between the audience and the extremists. The extremists refused to leave the theater after the show was cancelled. The police fired shots to disperse them. The extremists continued their physical attacks on the organizers, reporters, and photographers. A number of them were arrested. *Al Watan* reported the Ministry of Culture and Information's deputy minister for cultural affairs said literary clubs can show films, if suitable for the public.

The government censored most forms of public artistic expression and prohibited cinemas and public musical or theatrical performances, except those considered folkloric.

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 and prohibited in the form of public demonstrations.

Public meetings were usually segregated by gender. The authorities monitored large nonfamily gatherings, particularly if women were present. The religious police dispersed any large nonfamily groups found in public places, such as restaurants. However, men and women can mix in some public places that cater to noncitizens. In Jeddah, a local Saudi-American business group routinely holds its general meetings in a hotel where male and female citizens and noncitizen participants mix freely.

In August the government allowed the Shi'a of the Eastern Province to assemble to conduct three small, peaceful demonstrations centered in the Qatif oasis protesting Israeli military operations in Lebanon.

Freedom of Association

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

The government prohibited the establishment of political parties or any group that the government considered opposing the regime, or possibly overstepping the bounds of criticism by challenging the king's authority (see section 3). Any associations must be licensed by the MOI and comply with its rules and regulations.

The Human Rights First Society (HRFS) continued to operate without a government license. In December the interior ministry stopped the HRFS from holding its first membership meeting in Najran. Otherwise, the interior ministry seldom interfered with the HRFS, although it harassed its leader, Ibrahim Al-Mugaiteeb.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Basic Law states that Islam is the official religion and all citizens are required to be Muslims. The legal system is based on the government-sanctioned interpretation of Islamic law. Government leaders called for tolerance and moderation, and King Abdullah and other leaders made public pronouncements condemning religious extremism. Government leaders also asserted that individuals have the right to practice their religion privately without government interference. On June 17, *Al-Riyadh* newspaper reported that the king gave a speech in Buraida in which he said that labeling citizens as secular, liberal, hypocrite, or extremist was divisive and contrary to the country's two key principles, Shari'a and national unity.

There is no legal recognition or protection of religious freedom, and it is severely restricted in practice. The government limits the practice of all but the officially sanctioned version of Islam and prohibits the public practice of other religions**.** The government continued to prohibit public practice of non-Muslim religions and limited religious practices of Shi'a and Sufi sects. As a matter of policy, the government confirmed it ensures and protects the right to private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious practice; however, this right was not always respected in practice and was not defined in law.

Conversion by a Muslim to another religion is widely considered apostasy, a crime punishable by death if the accused does not recant. There were no executions for apostasy during the reporting period, and there have been no reports of such executions for several years.

Citizens and especially foreigners widely believed in and sometimes practiced "magic" and "superstition." However, under the government's interpretation of Shari'a, magic was regarded as one of the worst forms of polytheism, and is an executable offense; however, in practice, individuals convicted of magic are not always executed. An unknown number of detainees were held in prison on the charge of "sorcery" or the alleged practice of "black magic" or "witchcraft."

The practice of other schools of Sunni Islam was unsupported by the government, and adherents of the Shi'a branch of Islam faced various forms of discrimination condoned by the government, including restrictions on religious practice and on the building of mosques and community centers (see also sections 1.e., 3, and 5).

The Shi'a Muslim minority, estimated to be between 10 and 15 percent of the citizen population, lived mostly in the Eastern Province, although a significant number resided in Medina in the Western Province and in Najran in the southwest. Members were subjected to officially sanctioned discrimination of various forms. Many Shi'a view the ultimate jurisdiction of Shari'a (Sunni) courts over intra-Shi'a family matters as impinging on their religious freedom (see section 1.e.).

An estimated 700,000 Sulaimani Ismailis, a subset of Shi'a Islam, live in the country, primarily in Najran. According to HRW and media reports, on October 31, the king pardoned 10 of the at least 57 Sulaimani Ismailis Shi'a jailed following rioting in Najran in 2000**.** There were reports that the government discriminated against Sulaiman Ismailis Shi'a by prohibiting them from having their own religious books, allowing religious leaders to declare them unbelievers, denying them government employment, restricting them to lower-level jobs, and relocating them from the southwest to other parts of the country or encouraging them to emigrate.

According to HRW, during August and September, a Sulaimani Ismaili Shi'a, Hadi Al-Mutif**,** conducted a hunger strike to protest his continued imprisonment for "insulting the Prophet Mohammed." In his first trial, Al-Mutif was reportedly sentenced to death. Reportedly the government never sentenced Al-Mutif to a certain term in prison; however, he has served at least 12 years. Reports that the king was going to pardon him during a December visit to Najran proved incorrect. At least one other man, a Sunni, who committed the same offense, was sentenced to life imprisonment, which was commuted to 14 years.

In September approximately 300 Sulaimani Ismaili Shi'a in Najran protested their "repression" and demanded the release of Ismailis held in jail since 2000 and an apology from a cleric and judge who labeled them "infidels." They also demanded the cessation of attempts by local authorities to resettle Yemeni tribesmen given citizenship on land owned by Ismailis.

Sulaimani Ismailis Shi'a in Najran reportedly were charged with practicing magic; however, the Shi'a Ismailis maintained that their practice was not magic as it adheres to their interpretation of Islam. Some conservative Sunnis disagree with this interpretation and claim that the Shi'a Ismailis believe in and practice magic.

The government tolerated the public celebration of the Shi'a holiday of Ashura and other Shi'a holidays in the Eastern Province city of Qatif. The police monitored the celebrations. No other public Ashura celebrations were allowed in the country, including in cities where Shi'a were in the majority, and many Shi'a traveled to Qatif or Bahrain to participate in Ashura celebrations. The government continued to exclude Shi'a perspectives from the state's extensive religious media and broadcast programming but appeared to have more sporadically enforced restrictions banning the importation and sale of Shi'a books and audio and video products. Shi'a were not allowed to teach religion to classes higher than the elementary grade level, and the government did not allow Shi'a to open private schools for girls.

The media reported that the government allowed the celebration of Gargean on the fifteenth day of Ramadan (i.e., children dress in traditional clothes going door-to-door asking for nuts and candies). This celebration reportedly began in the Eastern Province among the Shi'a but spread to the central, southern, and northern parts of the kingdom.

There was discrimination in the availability of facilities for religious activities. The government issued permits to construct a few Shi'a mosques, including a large mosque in Qatif, although the process was more cumbersome and took far longer for the Shi'a community than for Sunnis. The Shi'a have declined government offers to build state-supported mosques because the government prohibits the incorporation and display of Shi'a motifs in state-supported mosques.

Significant numbers of Sufis in the Western Province engaged in technically illegal practices such as celebrating the Mawlid, or Prophet's birthday, without government interference.

On December 7, prominent Sunni religious commentator and former professor at Imam Mohammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, Abdul Rahman Nasser Al-Barak, issued a fatwa attacking Shi'a, calling them "rejectionists" and "bearing all the characteristics of infidels."

The government confirmed its policy to protect the right to private worship and the right to possess and use personal religious materials. However, it did not legally provide for this right, and there were reports of religious police raids on private residences and detentions of non-Muslims for alleged religious violations, such as possession of non-Muslim literature or holding non-Muslim worship services; however, there were fewer reports than in 2005. Many non-Muslims continued to worship in fear of harassment and in manners that avoided discovery by police or religious police. For the first time, the government issued a report on the activities of the religious police during the year, which stated 1,652 individuals were arrested for being in public without praying during prayer time. The report also stated that there were 301,173 individuals arrested for working during prayer time. However, the report did not provide statistics on the numbers of individuals arrested for practicing non-Muslim religions. Anecdotal evidence suggested there was a decrease in both long-term and short-term detentions, and in arrests and deportations of non-Muslims. However, there were also reports that religious police, using both Muslim and non-Muslim informants, targeted non-Muslim religious leaders, organizers, and religious groups for harassment, arrest, and deportation in an effort to deter groups from conducting private, non-Muslim religious services (see section 1.f.).

During the year there were raids, arrests, and detentions of Christians throughout the country, although fewer than in the past. On October 15**,** the religious police raided a hall in Tabuk where a Filipino priest was preaching. The religious police confiscated bibles and detained the priest but no other churchgoers. The religious police turned the priest over to the "concerned authorities" to complete the investigation.

On June 9, 10 regular and religious police officers armed with wooden clubs raided a private Christian worship service in Jeddah. Approximately 100 Eritreans, Ethiopians and Filipinos were present. The police arrested the church leaders, two Ethiopians and two Eritreans. The church leaders were deported in July. In Jeddah, a Christian evangelical leader reported that religious police attended one of his services without disrupting the service but later in response to a complaint closed the church and detained one of the pastors.

The government did not officially permit non-Muslim clergy to enter the country for the purpose of conducting religious services, although some did under other auspices, and the government generally permitted 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**.** Catholics and Orthodox Christians, who require a priest on a regular basis to receive sacraments required of their faith, were particularly

affected.

Proselytizing by non-Muslims, including the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials such as bibles, was illegal**.** The promotion of nonofficial interpretations of Islam was less restricted than it was in previous years. Anyone wearing religious symbols in public that were considered idolatrous within the Hanbali school risked confrontation with the religious police.

Under the Hanbali interpretation of Shari'a, judges may discount the testimony of non-Muslims or those who do not adhere to "correct doctrine" (see section 1.e.). 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. 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 (see section 1.f.).

The government required noncitizens to carry legal resident identity cards *(Iqamas)*, which contained a religious designation for "Muslim" or "non-Muslim." There were reports that individual religious police pressured sponsors and employers not to renew legal resident identity cards of non-Muslims whom they had sponsored for employment if it was discovered or suspected that those individuals had either led, sponsored, or participated in private non-Muslim worship services. Additionally, there were 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.

During the month of December the press reported shopkeepers in Riyadh sold Christmas cards under the counter. During the year the religious police prohibited the sale of cards and flowers for Valentine's Day.

On December 29, the religious police raided a gathering for food and prayer involving members of the Ahmadiyya religious group**.** Authorities consider them non-Muslim and heretical. Reportedly, the religious police detained 49 members, including approximately 19 women and children and 14 youths. Of the 49 individuals, there were 25 Indians, 23 Pakistanis, and one Syrian. At year's end, all 49 remained in police custody (see Section 1.d.).

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

There was anti-Semitism and criticism of the policies of the government of Israel and Zionism in the media. For example, on January 13, an anti-Semitic cartoon in the *Al-Yawm* newspaper depicted Jews as thieves, calling them "God's Cheater People," a pun in Arabic on the expression "God's Chosen People."

According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), there was anti-Semitism in the media characterized by stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols, and comparisons of Israeli government actions to those of the Nazis. For example, on April 24, a cartoon in the *Al-Medina* newspaper depicted an Israel Defense Forces tank's treads forming a swastika. According to the ADL, further anti-Semitic material appeared in the *Ar-Riyadh* newspaper on February 9 to the effect that "the only ones to benefit from inciting strife and wars between the Christian and Muslim world are the Jews in Europe and in the West. If you do not believe that, then read the Protocols of the Elders of Zion…" Another example provided by the ADL came from an article in the *Al-Hayat* newspaper on June 6 comparing the Israeli government actions toward Palestinians to "the Nazi manner of killing, starvation, and racial segregation…"

In May Freedom House released a report that stated that its review of textbooks revealed examples of hate speech and in particular noted that religious textbooks emphasized intolerance and hatred of religious traditions, especially Christianity and Judaism. In November the government announced a multi-year project to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to promote tolerance and remove content disparaging religions other than Islam. Many recently utilized textbooks still contain language that was blatantly anti-Semitic and intolerant of Judaism, Christianity, and the Shi'a tradition (see section 5).

During the year the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue held 13 preparatory meetings throughout the country for the November 30 sixth national dialogue, which focused on education. According to the government the dialogue, meetings and preparations promoted tolerance and understanding, including for non-Muslim religions. During the year there were articles in local media reminding Muslims that Jews are "people of the book," that Jewish prophets such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jesus are shown due respect by Muslims, and that Mary was a Jew and is due respect by Muslims.

The government took no reported action against anti-Semitic cartoons and articles which appeared in the media.

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

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

The Basic Law does not provide for these rights. Freedom of movement was restricted. The government must issue an exit visa for an individual to leave the country. Male citizens have the freedom to travel within the country and abroad unless they are under the age of 21, in which case they require the permission of their guardian if they want to travel outside the country. The government restricted these rights for women based on its interpretation of Islamic Law. All women in the country were prohibited from driving. They must obtain written permission from a male relative or guardian before the authorities allow travel abroad (see section 5). The requirement to obtain permission from a male relative or guardian applied also to foreign women married to citizens or to minor and single adult daughters of citizen fathers. Since 2001, women have been able to obtain their own identity cards; however, the government required permission from a male relative or guardian to

receive a card (see section 5). The government has quietly begun to issue individual identification cards with a photograph to every female citizen, terminating the current practice of women carrying family cards only listing their names. Citizen women who have valid passports can obtain identity cards without needing verification from a male guardian; however, if a woman does not have a passport, she needs a male guardian to verify her identity (see section 5). During the year the government continued to issue national identity cards to women, despite a national campaign against the practice by some religious conservatives.

Restrictions on travel applied to dual national children of citizen fathers. In cases involving custody disputes between foreign citizen women and their citizen husbands, the husband was legally able to prevent the travel of the children out of the country. All women, including adult female citizens, require the written consent of a male guardian to travel outside the country. The government has worked with foreign consular officials to overcome a husband's refusal to permit travel by his female children and/or wife or ex-wife. During the year senior officials considered, on a case-by-case basis, allowing adult foreign citizen women to travel despite objections by their husbands, fathers, or other male relatives or guardians. However, government officials delayed issuing decisions and caused additional burdens and security concerns to those individuals attempting to leave the kingdom.

Noncitizen women married to citizens required permission from their husbands or fathers to travel. If a husband refused to grant permission to travel to his noncitizen wife, she could divorce her husband or not travel. If she divorced her husband, the government could issue her an exit visa, but she was unlikely to be allowed to re-enter the country.

Foreigners typically were allowed to reside or work in the country under the sponsorship of a citizen or business. Media reports in October announced an easing of this restriction for businessmen.

The government required citizens and foreign residents to carry identification cards. It did not permit foreigners to change their workplace without their sponsor's permission.

During the year the government continued to provide citizenship under Article 9 of the law on naturalization to some of the thousands of native residents who live in the country without possessing citizenship.

Collectively known as *Bidoons* ("without" in Arabic), these native-born residents lack citizenship due to an ancestor's failure to obtain nationality, including descendents of nomadic tribes such as the Anaiza and Shammar, some of whose ancestors were not counted among the native tribes during the reign of the kingdom's founder, King Abd al-Aziz; descendants of foreign-born fathers who emigrated to the country before citizenship was institutionalized; and rural migrants whose parents failed to register their births. They were denied employment and educational opportunities because of their lack of citizenship, and had limited ability to travel. Bidoons are among the poorest residents of the country because of their marginalized status.

The Basic Law prohibits employers from retaining foreign workers' passports; however, in practice most sponsors reportedly retained possession of foreign workers' passports. Foreign workers must obtain permission from their sponsors to travel abroad. If sponsors were involved in a commercial or labor dispute with foreign employees, they may ask the authorities to prohibit the employees from departing the country until the dispute is resolved. In some contract disputes, sponsors used this as a pressure tactic to resolve disputes in their favor, forcing employees to accept nominal amounts of the money owed to them or by having foreign employees deported (see sections 5 and 6.c.).

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; however, it previously revoked the citizenship of opponents of the government who reside outside the country (see section 3).

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

The government imposed travel bans on some reformers. The authorities sometimes confiscated passports of suspected oppositionists and their families. In addition, the government revoked the rights of some citizens to travel outside the country. In several cases the government revoked the right to travel for political reasons without notifying the individual or providing opportunities to contest the restriction.

During the year there were reports that some Shi'a activist writers and other public figures were banned from traveling and the government had confiscated their passports. However, a Shi'a professor, who faced a travel ban for his 2003 criticism of the government's discriminatory policies against the Shi'a, was allowed to travel.

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 provided protection against *refoulement*, the forced return of persons to a country where 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.

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

The UNHCR Representative Office to the GCC countries reported that in late 2005 the government permitted 364 Iraqi refugees at the Rafha refugee camp to reside in urban areas. During the year the UNHCR did not find any evidence of forcible repatriation. Since 1991 the UNHCR has facilitated the spontaneous repatriation of more than 8,000 Iraqi refugees (see section 1.c.). NGOs present in the camp included the Saudi Red Crescent and the International Islamic Relief Organization. At year's end less than 100 Iraqi refugees remained in the camp.

During the year the UNHCR granted refugee status to 216 people. No one who is in Saudi Arabia illegally, or has overstayed an *umrah* or *hajj* visa, may be granted refugee status.

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

The Basic Law states that the government is established on the principle of s*hura* or consultation and requires the king and crown prince to hold open majlises. (A *majlis* is an open-door meeting held by the king, a prince, or an important national or local official where, in theory, any male citizen or foreign national may express an opinion or a grievance.) The Basic Law states all individuals have the right to communicate with public authorities on any issue. This right to petition is interpreted by the government as a right to be exercised within traditional nonpublic means, in other words, not through the use of mass media. In practice, citizens did not have the right to change the government peacefully. There were restrictions, as demonstrated by the 2005 conviction of the three political reformers convicted of "sowing dissent and disobeying the ruler" and for overtly advocating democratic reform (see sections 1.e and 2.a.).

Elections and Political Participation

Only a few members of the ruling family had a voice in the choice of leaders or in changing the political system. On October 20, the king issued the new succession law which amended the 1992 Basic Law and formalized the process by creating the Allegiance Commission that will elect a king and crown prince upon the death or incapacitation of either. The Allegiance Commission is composed of the sons and grandsons of Abd al-Aziz bin Abd al-Rahman al-Faysal Al Sa'ud. This commission expands the role of the ruling family in the selection process. The government ruled on civil and religious matters within the limitations established by the Basic Law, religious law, tradition, and the need to maintain consensus among the ruling family and religious leaders.

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.

Reportedly, some criticized the limited responsibilities of the municipal advisory councils that reviewed and provided recommendations on administrative and budgetary issues. Only male, nonmilitary citizens of at least 21 years of age could vote in the nationwide 2005 elections for 592 seats on 178 municipal advisory councils (half of the total seats). Women were not permitted either to vote or to stand for office. Unofficial estimates were between 10 and 15 percent of eligible voters actually voted. The king completed the formation of the councils in December 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 legislation proposed by the ministries. The Consultative Council consists of 150 appointed male members and is divided into 11 committees. During the year the council appointed six women as part-time consultants on matters of family and women's issues. The government generally accepted amendments made by the council. The Consultative Council held hearings with some government officials to review the performance of their ministries and has the power to request documents from government ministries.

On June 27, for the first time, the Consultative Council rejected a proposed government policy to raise the salaries of members of the religious police.

The Supreme *Ulema Council* is another advisory body to the king and the cabinet (see section 1.e.). It reviews the government's public policies for compliance with Shari'a. The government viewed the council as an important source of religious legitimacy and took the council's opinions into account when promulgating legislation.

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. During the year King Abdullah visited all 13 provinces and held a variety of meetings with citizens throughout the country, including women. Ministers and district governors could be approached for discussion at a majlis, which were held on a regular basis.

Since 1992 various groups, including women and Shi'a, have submitted petitions calling for reform.

During the year three groups led by exiles advocated for a change in government. On April 30, the London-based Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) brought its satellite Islah TV back on air using the hot-bird satellite after years of having been blocked because of government pressure on the French satellite provider. Since its establishment in 1996, MIRA has claimed it advocates the peaceful overthrow of the royal family. The head of MIRA and host of Islah TV, Saad Al-Fagih, was a supporter of terrorism and provided financial and material support to al Qa'ida and Usama bin Laden. Previously, MIRA and the London-based extremist Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR) had advocated overthrowing the monarchy by force. MIRA and the CDLR criticized the government, using the Internet and satellite radio stations. On August 11, MIRA unsuccessfully tried to spark protests in the country. In October 2004, MIRA and CDLR also attempted to organize from London protests within the country but were unsuccessful largely due to their unpopularity with the public (see sections 1.d. and 2.b.).

On August 9, a Paris-based group, the Saudi Democratic Opposition Front (SDOF), announced its formation and called for the peaceful overthrow of the monarchy. It claimed a "desire for democracy" and an enhancement in liberties in society. The SDOF stated it will coordinate its activities with other opponents of the government, chiefly MIRA. The SDOF is led by 72-year-old Prince Talal Mohammed Al-Rashid, the son of the last ruler of the Rashidi emirate whose capital was in Hail. Al-Rashid has lived in exile in France since 1980. There was no subsequent reported activity by this group.

There were no women or religious minorities in the cabinet. At least four of the 150-member Consultative Council were Shi'a.

Government Corruption and Transparency

There was a widespread public perception of corruption on the part of some members of the royal family and the executive branch of the government. In the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions ranking of countries in terms of the degree to which corruption is perceived to exist among public officials and politicians, the kingdom was considered to have a serious corruption problem.

The absence of transparency in government accounts and in decision making encouraged this perception. There are no laws providing for public access to government information. Information concerning specific instances, allegations regarding corruption, or government actions against corruption was not available to the public, although allegations were known to those with access to foreign media.

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

The government viewed its interpretation of Islamic law as the only necessary guide to protect human rights. The MOI licenses and monitors compliance with rules and regulations by NGOs, including professional associations, charities, and social organizations. The two licensed domestic human rights organizations operated in a restricted ambit, reliant on government support. The one nonlicensed human rights organization, HRFS, operated without legal status.

On a number of occasions, the local media quoted HRFS president Ibrahim Al-Mugaiteeb and reported on HRFS operations. After having previously been deprived of his passport, Al-Mugaiteeb made several trips into and out of the country. He was also made a member of the HRC.

The NSHR, which was originally endowed by King Fahd, continued to receive requests for assistance and complaints about the government. Since its creation in March 2004, the NSHR has received approximately 7,000 complaints. Most of its members are academics, and two of its former members are ministers (social affairs, and education). Ten of its 41 members were women. The NSHR has established offices in Jeddah, Dammam, Riyadh, and Jizan. By year's end it claimed to have handled more than 6,000 complaints, international as well as domestic, including "political injustices, administrative corruption, and reports by expatriate workers alleging abuse." The NSHR prefers to resolve cases by working with government agencies rather than filing court cases. The NSHR reported government officials cooperated with requests for information and action to resolve complaints.

On December 25, King Abdullah announced the appointment of the 24 members of the HRC board of directors. This specialized government organization has broad powers and reports directly to the king. Headquartered in Riyadh, the HRC was designed to protect, raise awareness of, and ensure the implementation of human rights in line with Shari'a rule. The HRC chairman has ministerial rank.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, but not nationality. Racial discrimination occurred. There is legal and systemic discrimination based on gender. The government and private organizations cooperated in providing services for persons with disabilities; however, there is no legislation mandating public access. The Shi'a minority continued to suffer social, legal, economic, and political discrimination (see section 2.c.).

Women

Shari'a prohibits abuse and violence against all innocent persons, including women. Although the government did not keep statistics on spousal abuse or other forms of violence against women, reportedly such violence and abuse were common problems. Hospital workers reported many women were admitted for treatment of injuries apparently the result of spousal violence. Even though hospitals are now required to report any suspicious injuries to authorities, they are not appropriately trained to meet this requirement.

Foreign embassies received many reports that employers abused foreign women working as domestic servants. Some embassies 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, and rape. Often female citizens were accused of committing many of the reported abuses (see section 5, Trafficking in Persons).

During the year the media reported more frequently on cases involving domestic abuse of women, servants, and children. Over 500 cases were reported. There were more reports about employers punished for abuse of domestic servants.

On August 19, the daily tabloid *Al-Shams* published a two-page investigative report on girls fleeing their homes due to domestic violence. The girls usually went to one of the social care houses, where they may be abused by supervisors. Some girls committed suicide because of mistreatment and the fear of being sent back to their families.

On August 20, *ASharq Al-Awsat* reported that the kingdom took actual steps to establish courts dealing with domestic violence. Specialists and activists against domestic violence called for increasing the number of social care houses and developing their services in order to protect victims.

The justice ministry acknowledged the large scale of the problem. The social affairs ministry's department of social protection conducted a study on domestic abuse in order to draft appropriate laws to protect women and children. The social affairs ministry also reportedly coordinated with other ministries to raise awareness. Nevertheless, the government considered such cases generally to be family matters and did not intervene unless charges of abuse were brought to its attention. Increasingly, the NSHR investigated and instigated court cases against allegations of physical and sexual abuse. These cases usually involved abuse by a husband or father. The NSHR advocated for tougher laws and sentences for abuse. It was difficult for noncitizen women to obtain redress in the courts due to the courts' strict evidentiary rules, and the women and servants' own fear of reprisals.

Prostitution is illegal. However, some women (and men), primarily noncitizens, reportedly engaged in prostitution. The extent of prostitution

was not known.

Law and custom discriminated against women. 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. There were no active women's rights groups per se. Women's rights were openly discussed during the Gulf Businesswomen's Forum and in the National Dialogue forums from April 3 to 5 in which women participated. NSHR also addressed various women's rights issues. Women may not legally drive motor vehicles and were restricted in their use of public facilities when men were present. Women must enter city buses by separate rear entrances and sit in specially designated sections. Women risked arrest by the religious police for riding in a vehicle driven by a male who was not an employee or a close male relative.

The law provides that women may not be admitted to a hospital for medical treatment without the consent of a male relative; however, this was not generally enforced. According to law and custom, women may not undertake domestic or foreign travel alone (see section 2.d.).

All women require the permission (for an "exit visa") of a citizen male to travel, usually the husband or the father though sometimes the eldest son or eldest brother. This applies to all women, including noncitizen spouses of citizen men. Children, including dual national children, also require travel authorizations by a citizen male, and males under the age of 21 require the father's consent for issuance of their first passports. If a husband refuses to grant permission to travel to his wife, including noncitizen wives, the wife cannot travel. For noncitizen wives, in order to depart the country the only alternative is to divorce the husband, in which case the government could issue her an exit visa. In this case, if the woman has children she would not be allowed to take them with her, and it is unlikely she would be allowed to re-enter the country.

In public, a woman was expected to wear an *abaya* (a black garment that covers the entire body) and also to 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. During the year religious police admonished and harassed citizen and noncitizen women who failed to wear an *abaya* and hair cover.

Women were also subject to discrimination under Shari'a as interpreted by the government, which stipulates daughters receive half the inheritance awarded to their brothers. 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 various 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 (see section 1.e.). Although Islamic law permits as many as four wives, polygamy was less common due to demographic and economic changes. Islamic law enjoins a man to treat each wife equally. In practice, such equality was left to the discretion of the husband. The government placed greater restrictions on women than on men regarding marriage to noncitizens and non-Muslims (see section 1.f.).

Women had to demonstrate legally specified grounds for divorce, but men may divorce without giving cause. In doing so, men were required to immediately pay an amount of money agreed upon at the time of the marriage, which serves as a one-time alimony payment. Women who demonstrate legal grounds for divorce also were entitled to this alimony. Some women claimed their husbands refused to sign the final divorce papers, leaving the women in a state of limbo, unable to travel, obtain a business license, attend a university or college, or seek hospital care. If 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. Custody of children over these ages was awarded 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 were limited to studying such subjects as engineering, journalism, and architecture. Approximately 5 to 7 percent of government scholarships for studying overseas are given to women. Men may study overseas; the law provides that women may do so only if accompanied by a spouse or male guardian. The government paid the fees for a male guardian (or in some cases an older female guardian) to accompany female Saudi students on scholarships. In practice families rather than legal requirements decided whether women studied overseas without a guardian.

During the year there was increased attention in the press to women's issues, including gender discrimination, domestic abuse, health, rising divorce rates, employment, driving, and legal problems women face in the business world. Six women advised members of the Consultative Council (see section 3). Other women provided advice in private, closed-door sessions or through female members of the royal family. The two women elected to the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce continued to guide this organization. In February women also ran as candidates for the board of directors of the Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce and Industry; however, none were elected. The woman elected to the board of directors of the Saudi Engineers Council continued to guide the organization. On June 30, the Jeddah Literary Club held its first literary and cultural event for women.

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 professions such as architecture and journalism. The justice ministry agreed to license female lawyers who had previously been unable to practice law even though they had completed law degrees abroad or worked in law firms outside the country. Female lawyers, however, may not represent clients in court. Many foreign women worked as domestic servants and nurses.

In August the Ministry of Commerce and Industry issued regulations allowing female engineers to open their own engineering offices. One female engineer opened her own engineering office a few weeks after this decision.

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. However, the degree of segregation varied by region, with the central region having the most restrictions and the eastern and western regions more relaxed. Despite gender segregation, the law provides women the right to obtain business licenses for work in fields that might require supervision of foreign workers, interact with male clients, or deal on a regular basis with government officials.

While there is no law prohibiting women from obtaining licenses to open businesses, they face many obstacles. Applications for licenses in most sectors were denied because most governing ministries did not have women's sections that could monitor the business. Even though the commerce ministry abolished the requirement for a woman to have a male representative with her whenever conducting business transactions with the government, reportedly many government agencies still insisted on this requirement.

In hospital settings and in the energy industry, women and men worked together, and, in some instances, women supervised male employees. During the year the government allowed female citizen radio news broadcasters to work for the first time. The September 2005 labor law expanded the right of women to maternity leave and required employers to provide child care if they employed 50 or more female employees.

Children

The government provided all citizen children with free education and medical care. Children were segregated by gender in schools, usually beginning at the age of 7; however, schools were integrated through the fourth grade, or around the ages of 10 and 11, in some areas.

Abuse of children was a problem, although it was difficult to gauge the prevalence of child abuse, since the government kept no national statistics on such cases. Although in general the culture greatly prizes children, studies by citizen female doctors indicated that severe abuse and neglect of children appeared to be more widespread than previously reported. At least three NGOs, one in Riyadh, one in Qasim, and one in Jeddah, run shelters for women and children. The press has also raised national consciousness about the problem.

The education ministry continued to teach children their rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of Children.

During the year there were reports that the government discriminated against noncitizen children on the basis of national origin, denying them access to education and emergency health care. HRW reported the government targeted Chadian children that had been born in Saudi Arabia.

Trafficking in Persons

There is no specific antitrafficking law. However, most forms of trafficking are criminalized under existing statutes. A 2004 ministerial decree specifically prohibits all forms of trafficking. The government issued implementing regulations for the September 2005 labor law. Domestic laborers are not protected under the country's labor law. The majority of cases involving trafficking were settled out of court by mediation and settlements, and criminal prosecutions against abusive employers were few.

The country is a destination country for workers from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. Some foreign workers were subjected to conditions which constituted involuntary servitude, including nonpayment of wages, debt bondage, confinement, and physical or psychological intimidation. Cases of physical and sexual abuse were also reported. Domestic employees were especially vulnerable to abuse. Children were also reportedly trafficked into begging rings.

The government took minimal measures to protect trafficking victims. Due to a lack of victim identification procedures in deportation centers and police stations, it is believed that many victims of trafficking are deported or arrested rather than afforded sensitive protection services. Some victims were protected at one of three shelters run by the Ministry of Social Affairs operating in Riyadh, Dammam, and Jeddah, but most victims feared arrest or deportation if approaching government authorities due to their status as runaways (technically illegal); as such, most victims fled directly to their respective embassies to await repatriation.

The government reportedly assists some trafficking victims with shelter, access to legal and medical services, and temporary residency status, which includes temporary relief from deportation. Trafficking victims are reportedly treated at public hospitals.

Foreign laborers', including domestic workers', passports were often illegally retained by their employers sometimes resulting in forced labor. Foreign nationals who have been recruited abroad have, after their arrival in the country, been presented with work contracts that specified lower wages and fewer benefits than originally promised. A small number of noncitizen women were thought to engage in prostitution, comprising a minor element of the trafficking problem in the kingdom (see sections 5, 6.c., and 6.e.).

Most victims prefer to settle their cases out of court due to the length of time it takes to receive a judgment and a perception of bias toward citizens of the country by the judicial system. On August 9, a Filipina maid fled her sponsor after allegedly enduring seven months of physical abuse. The police arrested her sponsor who confessed and paid an out-of-court settlement of approximately $8,000 (30,000 SR). On September 12, an Indonesian maid was allegedly beaten by her sponsor's wife. She settled out of court for an undisclosed amount. On November 6, nine Nepalese women who claimed to have suffered physical and verbal abuse during their employment as maids in the country were repatriated to Nepal.

On August 26, *Al-Shams* presented an investigative report entitled "Girls for Sale" claiming trafficking of Yemeni girls into the country had increased recently. Allegedly, trafficking gangs were bringing the girls to marry men illegally. "Marriage matcher" Um Mohammed said she looks for men seeking a Yemeni girl and charges $2,666 (10,000 SR). Trafficking takes two forms: men travel to Yemen, select their prospective wives, then smuggle them into the country for $1,333 (5,000 SR); or gangs smuggle Yemeni girls into the country for marriage at $2,666 (10,000 SR).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs heads a multi-agency working group on combating trafficking in persons. The group includes representation from the Ministries of Labor, Interior, Justice, Culture and Information, Hajj, and the Human Rights Commission.

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

The government uses the media to educate the public about foreign workers' rights and trafficking in persons.

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

Persons with Disabilities

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. The government and private charitable organizations cooperated in education, employment, and other services for persons with disabilities.

During the year the government took a variety of steps promoting more rights for and elimination of discrimination against persons with disabilities. The government established an endowment committee for children with disabilities and a supreme council to deal with the affairs of the disabled, with the crown prince as chairman. Foreign criminal rings reportedly imported children with disabilities for the purpose of forced begging (see sections 5, 6.c. and 6.f.). There were numerous government-sponsored centers for persons with disabilities, including organizations for children with Down syndrome and autism. Disabled persons, however, were still hidden away from society and even family.

Police generally transported persons with mental disabilities found wandering alone in public to their families or a hospital. Police asserted that, according to Islam, family members should be taking care of such individuals.

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. For example, some bilateral agreements governed pay, benefits, and work conditions. Consequently, pay scales for identical or similar labor or professional services were set by nationality such that two similarly qualified and experienced foreign nationals performing the same employment duties received varied compensation based on their nationalities.

Throughout the year the media reported on married couples forced to divorce by their in-laws or others because either the husband or wife was from "inappropriate lineage," i.e., a nontribal family or from an inferior tribe. For example, the half brothers of Fatima Al-Timani successfully filed for the divorce of Fatima and her husband Mansour Al-Timani because they claimed Mansour had lied about his inferior tribal lineage. At year's end his appeal of the divorce was before a Riyadh court. In July she chose imprisonment rather than living with her half brothers or in a shelter. After the divorce, prison officials forbade him from visiting her because the court had voided their marriage. At year's end the case remained before the courts.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Under Shari'a as interpreted in the kingdom, sexual activity between two people 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 (see section 1.c.). There were reports of societal discrimination based on sexual orientation.

There were reports of discrimination, physical violence, and harassment toward homosexuals.

On August 16, the media reported that 250 young men were detained and subsequently 20 were arrested at a suspected "gay wedding" in Jizan.

On November 7, the media reported that police arrested five men on November 2 for preparing to stage a beauty contest for homosexual men. The five men had previously been arrested in May for the same offense. The police confiscated evaluation sheets, beauty products, make-up, lingerie, sex toys, and aphrodisiacs. The media also reported that several months before this incident, 92 men had been arrested at a gay party in Al-Qatif for wearing women's clothes, make-up, and wigs. At year's end none of these men had been sentenced.

According to a December 23 press report, during the year a journalist was arrested for "harboring destructive thoughts" and accused of promoting homosexuality by commenting on Internet fora that homosexuality is caused by genetics. The case was dismissed. The lawyer who defended the journalist was criticized for being a "lawyer for homosexuals."

Beginning in June the NSHR held meetings to prepare a proposal for a system to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and protect HIV/AIDS patients in the kingdom. The media reported that there are 11,000 people living with AIDS in the country. Although the media continued to discourage discrimination against AIDS patients and those infected with HIV, the press reported that the government failed to provide proper medical treatment to HIV-positive noncitizens and treated them poorly until their deportation. The Ministry of Health set up three HIV centers that provided diagnostic and preventive services. In September the media reported medical staff refused to attend to a pregnant HIV-positive woman, causing her to miscarry.

Incitement to Acts of Discrimination

The government worked to review and revise school textbooks used at schools which it maintains inside and outside the kingdom to eliminate intolerant and discriminatory language that promotes racial or ethnic hatred or incited violence against any racial or ethnic group (see section 2.c.).

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The Basic Law does not address freedom of association. The government prohibited the establishment of labor unions; however, since 2001,

the government has authorized the establishment of labor committees for citizens in local companies, including factories, with more than 100 employees. However, no practical steps have been taken to implement this decision.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

Neither the 1992 Basic Law nor the 2005 Labor Law provide for collective bargaining. Collective bargaining remained prohibited. Foreign workers comprised approximately 88 percent of the work force in the private sector.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor. The law prohibits employers from retaining foreign employees' passports without the employees' consent. This law was not well known or enforced, so it was frequently violated. This practice sometimes resulted in forced labor, especially in remote areas where workers were unable to leave their places of work and cannot legally travel without an identity card. In addition some sponsors prevented foreign workers from obtaining exit visas to pressure them into signing a new work contract or to drop claims against their employer for unpaid salary or benefits (see section 2.d.). Finally, some sponsors refused to provide foreign workers with a "letter of no objection" that would allow them to be employed by another sponsor.

There were many reports of workers whose employers refused to pay several months, or even years, of accumulated salary or other promised benefits. Many foreign workers went to labor courts, which regularly ruled in favor of the workers. Labor courts, while generally fair, sometimes took many months to reach a final appellate ruling. Often noncitizen workers engaged in a court case against their employers cannot legally work, placing an additional burden on the worker and compelling a negotiated settlement. Employers sometimes delayed cases until a worker's funds were exhausted, and the worker was forced to withdraw his case (see section 5).

The labor ministry established the department for protection of foreign workers to address abuse and exploitation of foreign workers (such as sexual harassment, mistreatment, and nonpayment of salaries). Workers may also submit complaints and seek help from the 37 labor ministry offices throughout the country.

In the first six months of the year, the labor minister banned 75 companies from obtaining labor visas. Companies were banned for trading in visas, nonpayment of employee wages, and for a variety of other reasons.

The law does not specifically prohibit forced or compulsory labor by children, and there were a few reports that it occurred (see section 6.d.).

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

Child labor did not appear to be a problem, with the possible rare exceptions of forced child begging rings, and possibly family businesses. The government implemented a regulation requiring that all camel jockeys be at least 18 years of age, and there were indications it was enforced.

Under a new labor law, no juvenile under the age of 15 can work in a vocational field unless he is the only family worker. There is no minimum age for workers employed in family-owned businesses or in other areas that are construed as extensions of the household, such as farming, herding, and domestic service.

Children under the age of 18 may not be employed in hazardous or harmful industries, such as mining, or industries employing power-operated machinery. While there is no formal government entity responsible for enforcing the minimum age for employment of children, the justice ministry has jurisdiction and has acted as plaintiff in the few cases that have arisen against alleged violators. In general children played a minimal role in the work force.

Child beggars were reportedly often noncitizens who had been trafficked into the country for that purpose or were Hajj or Umra over-stayers. The social affairs ministry maintained special offices in both Mecca and Medina to combat the growing problem of child beggars.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

While there is no official minimum wage for citizen workers, the unofficial private sector minimum wage was $400 (1,500 SR) per month, which is based on the minimum monthly contribution to the pension system. For noncitizen workers, there was no official minimum wage. Where they exist, bilateral agreements set wages for noncitizen workers. Individual contracts also set wages that varied according to the type of work performed and the nationality of the worker (see section 5).

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. Labor law provides for a 24-hour rest period, normally on Fridays, although the employer may grant it on another day. The labor law increased annual leave for citizen employees from 14 to 21 days and provided a minimum six-week maternity leave for female citizen employees and new requirements to provide child care at places of employment. The average wage for citizens generally provided a decent standard of living for the worker and family.

Sources produced varying estimates of the actual rate of citizen unemployment. The minister of labor stated the unemployment rate was 5 percent (because very few citizens enrolled in a recent job placement program). The National Statistics Bureau claimed unemployment was 9.6 percent. Some bankers believed the unemployment rate was 20 percent, and a prominent royal and business leader recently stated the number was closer to 30 percent. None of these estimates included women, who are prohibited from working in the majority of business sectors and positions. On May 10, the media reported that the General Organization for Technical Education and Vocational Training (GOTEVOT) reported it had 6,971 female trainees for cashiering, receptionist, and other "appropriate" vocational areas and had trained over 10,000 as a practical step to add women to the workforce. In September GOTEVOT reported it opened a number of colleges for women in the country.

Approximately 80 percent of all working citizens worked directly for the government. Indirectly, nearly all citizens worked for the government in one way or another if those working for parastatals, such as Saudi Arabian Airlines and Saudi Aramco, were included. According to the government, citizen workers accounted for only 12 percent, less than 800,000 of the approximately 6.76 million persons employed in the private sector; foreign nationals held the remaining 88 percent of the jobs (see section 6.b.).

Labor regulations require employers to protect most workers from job-related hazards and disease. However, foreign nationals reported frequent failures to enforce health and safety standards. Farmers, herdsmen, domestic servants, and workers in family-operated businesses were not covered by these regulations.

Foreign nationals who have been recruited abroad have, after their arrival in the country, been presented with work contracts that specified lower wages and fewer benefits than originally promised. Other foreign workers have signed contracts in their home countries and later were pressured to sign less favorable contracts upon arrival. Some employees reported that, at the end of their contract service, their employers refused to grant permission to allow them to return home. Recognizing this issue, the authorities have created a booklet on foreign workers' rights that was distributed at ports of entry and foreign embassies in the country.

The labor laws, including those designed to limit working hours and regulate working conditions, did not apply to foreign domestic servants, who may not seek the protection of the labor courts. However, the bilateral labor agreements stipulate work conditions which provide for one day of rest per week. There were credible reports that female domestic servants were sometimes forced to work 16 to 20 hours per day, seven days per week. There were numerous confirmed reports of maids fleeing employers and seeking refuge in their embassies or consulates (see section 5). Foreign embassies continued to receive reports of employers abusing domestic servants. Such abuse included withholding of food, beatings, other physical abuse, and rape (see section 5).

The government has established welfare shelters to house female domestic servants who flee their place of work. The government offered arbitration between the worker and employer and investigated allegations of abuse. Allegations were either settled in court or through negotiation.

The campaign to remove illegal immigrants from the country did little to reduce unemployment or to increase the number of jobs held by citizens. Illegal immigrants worked in positions that most citizens considered unworthy. The government carried out the campaign to remove the illegal aliens by widely publicizing its enforcement of existing laws against both the illegal aliens and the citizens employing or sponsoring them.

The expeditious repatriation of some illegal immigrants and the legalization of others improved overall working conditions for legally employed foreigners. Illegal immigrants generally were willing to accept lower salaries and fewer benefits than legally employed immigrants. The departure or legalization of illegal workers reduced the competition for certain jobs and thereby reduced the incentive for legal immigrants to accept lower wages and fewer benefits. Furthermore, their departure or legalization removed a large portion of the class of workers most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation because of their illegal status.