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2009 Human Rights Report: Belarus

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

March 11, 2010

Belarus is a republic with a population of 9.5 million. The country has a directly elected president, who is chief of state, and a bicameral parliament, the National Assembly, consisting of the Chamber of Representatives (lower house) and the Council of the Republic (upper house). A prime minister appointed by the president is the nominal head of government. In practice, however, power is concentrated in the presidency. Since his election in 1994 as president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka has consolidated his power over all institutions and undermined the rule of law through authoritarian means, manipulated elections, and arbitrary decrees. Subsequent presidential elections have not been free or fair, and the September 2008 parliamentary election failed to meet international standards. While civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces, their members continued to commit numerous human rights abuses.

The government's human rights record remained very poor as government authorities continued to commit frequent serious abuses. The right of citizens to change their government was severely restricted. The government failed to account for past politically motivated disappearances. Prison conditions remained extremely poor, and reports of abuse of prisoners and detainees continued. Arbitrary arrests, detentions, and imprisonment of citizens for political reasons, criticizing officials, or for participating in demonstrations also continued. The judiciary lacked independence, trial outcomes usually were predetermined, and many trials were conducted behind closed doors. The government further restricted civil liberties, including freedoms of press, speech, assembly, association, and religion and continued to enforce politically motivated military conscriptions of opposition youth leaders. The government seized published materials from civil society activists and limited the distribution of a number of independent media outlets. State security services used unreasonable force to disperse peaceful protesters. Corruption continued to be a problem. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and political parties were subjected to harassment, fines, and prosecution. Religious leaders were fined or deported for performing services, and churches continued to face persecution from authorities. Trafficking in persons remained a significant problem, although some progress was made to combat it. There was discrimination against Roma, ethnic, and sexual minorities, and against use of the Belarusian language. Authorities harassed independent unions and dismissed their members, severely limiting the ability of the workers to form and join independent trade unions and to organize and bargain collectively.

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 during the year that the government or its agents committed any arbitrary or unlawful killings.

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b. Disappearance

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

On at least three occasions during the year, activists reported that plainclothes security forces personnel abducted members of civil society and the political opposition from the street in Minsk, drove them outside the city, and dumped them in forests miles away. In December 2008 plainclothes security forces abducted Artur Finkevich, leader of the Young Belarus opposition group from the street, beat him, and left him in a forest near Rakau, approximately 25 miles west of Minsk. On November 27, opposition activist Uladzimir Lemesh was pushed into a vehicle, handcuffed, and dropped off in a forest 10 miles outside of Minsk. On December 5, security forces abducted opposition youth leader Zmitser Dashkevich near his home in Minsk, drove him to a forest approximately 40 miles north of Minsk, and forced him out of the car. The following day, security forces in Minsk abducted Yauhen Afnahel, a coordinator for the civic movement European Belarus, and dumped him outside the city.

In 2006 authorities suspended the investigation into the 2000 disappearance and presumed killing of journalist Zmitser Zavadski. There was evidence of government involvement in these cases, but authorities continued to deny any involvement in the disappearances.

The prosecutor general continued to extend its 10-year-long investigation into the 1999 disappearance of former interior minister and opposition leader Yury Zakharanka. There were no developments in the continuing investigations in the 1999 disappearances of opposition activist Viktor Hanchar and businessman Anatol Krasouski.

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

The law prohibits such practices; however, the Belarusian Committee for State Security (KGB), riot police, and other security forces continued to routinely beat detainees and demonstrators. Police beat individuals during arrests and in detention for organizing or participating in demonstrations or other opposition activities.

On February 14, riot police forcefully broke up a peaceful march involving approximately 100 youth members of the political opposition in central Minsk and beat Malady Front leader Zmitser Dashkevich and members Mikalai Dzemizhenka and Pavel Kuryanovich. On February 16, police violently dispersed a Solidarity Day gathering in Minsk and beat a number of opposition activists who subsequently required medical treatment for injuries including cuts and bruises. In a separate incident the same day, riot police forcefully dispersed opposition activists praying at the site of a former Bernardine monastery.

On July 16, police broke up several Solidarity Day rallies across the country. In Minsk police detained and beat approximately 10 European Belarus civil campaign activists inside a police bus. Young Belarus leader Artur Finkevich and youth activist Andrei Kim reported that they were abused at a police station.

On September 9, members of the opposition held a protest in Minsk against Russian-Belarusian military exercises then under way; police used force to disrupt the protest. For example, European Belarus civil campaign activist Zmitser Barodzka stated that law enforcement officers had injured his nose. The following day police detained 17 opposition activists for four hours at a police station, during which time the officers allegedly harassed, humiliated, and physically assaulted them. Police also denied the detainees access to medical assistance.

In September 2008 the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), in cooperation with the domestic human rights NGO Vyasna, released a joint report, *Conditions of Detention in Belarus*, based on interviews with more than 30 persons. The report noted "substantial evidence" of the use of torture and mistreatment of suspects during criminal and administrative investigations.

Hazing of new army recruits with beatings and other forms of physical and psychological abuse continued; however, the situation improved somewhat with the government increasing prosecutions. For example, on December 11, a Minsk military court convicted eight former conscripts to penalties ranging from two years of house arrest up to eight years in prison for abusing 10 fellow soldiers in a military unit between August 2008 and April. One of the soldiers was beaten to death on April 7.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions remained austere and posed threats to life and health. There were shortages of food, medicine, warm clothing, and bedding. Ventilation in cells and overall sanitation was poor. As a result, tuberculosis, pneumonia, and other communicable diseases were prevalent.

On September 9, the United Nations Development Program reported that none of the country's prisons fully complied with the World Health Organization's tuberculosis infection control guidelines and expressed concern over sexual and other types of harassment and violence in prisons.

The report by FIDH and Vyasna concluded that prison conditions in the country were "extremely unsatisfactory and amount to inhumane treatment." Those interviewed in preparation of the report included former prisoners and detainees, relatives of prisoners, defense attorneys, NGO members, and a former judge. Despite numerous requests to the Ministries of Interior and Justice, government officials refused to meet with FIDH representatives or approve requests to visit detention facilities.

According to a 2008 Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) report, authorities continued to isolate prisoners--particularly inmates with HIV/AIDS and foreign citizens--and restricted or impeded a variety of rights, including the right to appeal their sentences, express their political and civil beliefs, vote, and obtain information from their families. Prison administrators arbitrarily persecuted inmates and applied severe penalties for minor violations of the "internal regime."

Former prisoners reported that medical check-ups were rare, conducted by underqualified medical personnel, and that examination results were often fabricated. Authorities failed to provide conditions necessary for maintaining proper personal hygiene. Prisoners often complained of malnutrition and low quality uniforms and bedding. Some former political prisoners reported that they were subjected to psychological abuse and often had to share a cell with violent criminals. They also reported that authorities neither explained nor protected their legal rights.

Overcrowding in prisons, detention centers, and work release prisons ("khimiya") was a serious problem. Persons sentenced to khimiya, a form of internal exile, lived in prison barracks and were forced to work under strict conditions.

The law permits family and friends to bring detainees food and hygiene products and to mail parcels to prisoners, but in many cases authorities did not respect the law.

According to the government, there were 37,578 persons in confinement as of May, including approximately 1,200 juveniles. Of all prisoners, 46 percent were serving sentences for economic crimes including embezzlement, fraud, tax evasion, theft, money laundering, and illegal business activities. Prisoners who complained about abuse of their rights often faced humiliation, death threats, or other forms of punishment. Some said they were blackmailed. Sources claimed

that applications for parole frequently depended on bribing prison personnel. While standard bribes were generally between BYR 430,000 and BYR 646,000 (\$200 and \$300), high-profile prisoners were often asked to pay larger amounts.

During the year there were no reports of independent monitoring of prison conditions by domestic or international human rights groups, independent media, or the International Committee of the Red Cross. However, on occasion authorities granted foreign diplomats access to political prisoners and other jailed persons in the presence of prison officials. For example, on May 29, the head of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) office in Minsk visited Mikalai Autukhovich at pretrial detention facilities.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law limits arbitrary detention; however, the government did not respect these limits in practice. Authorities continued to arrest individuals for political reasons and to use administrative measures to detain political activists before, during, and after protests.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The Ministry of Interior has authority over the police, but the KGB and presidential security services also exercised police functions. The president has the right to subordinate all security bodies to his personal command. Petty corruption among police was widespread. In 2008 authorities convicted 103 police officers of various crimes and held more than 5,000 administratively liable or subject to disciplinary action. From January to May the number of corruption-related offenses increased by 15.5 percent, while bribery cases reportedly rose from 470 to 501. Impunity remained a serious problem. While individuals have the right to report police abuse to the prosecutor, the government often did not investigate abuses by the security forces or hold perpetrators accountable.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment While in Detention

Police routinely detained and arrested individuals without a warrant. Under the law police must request permission from a prosecutor to detain persons for longer than three hours. In practice, however, these procedures usually were a formality. Detained persons suspected of a crime may be held for up to 10 days without formal charge and for up to 18 months after charges are filed. Under the law, prosecutors and investigators have the authority to extend detention without consulting a judge. Detainees have the right to petition the legality of their detention; however, in practice appeals by suspects seeking court review of their detentions were frequently suppressed or ignored.

Police often detained individuals for several hours, ostensibly to confirm their identity. This tactic was frequently used to detain members of the opposition and demonstrators, to prevent the distribution of leaflets and newspapers, or as a pretext to break up civil society meetings.

During the year authorities arbitrarily detained or arrested scores of individuals, including opposition figures and members of the independent media, for reasons that were widely considered to be politically motivated.

On February 8, riot police in Vaukavysk arrested two former political prisoners and entrepreneurs, Mikalai Autukhovich and Yury Lyavonau, and their associate, Uladzimir Asipenka, in armed raids. On February 18, authorities charged the three with deliberate destruction of property, arson, and illegal arms possession. On June 23, Autukhovich was additionally charged with terrorism. Investigators extended their probe every three months to hold the activists in custody pending trial, which remained unannounced at year's end. Between April and July, police also detained four other persons for 10 days and questioned in relation to the Autukhovich case. In early September police placed Mikhail Kazlou in a pretrial holding facility over his purported failure to report on Autukhovich's plans for terrorist attack. Police released Lyavonau without charge on August 8 and formally closed his case on September 24.

Antinuclear protesters were often banned from holding information campaigns. On April 26, opposition youth Yauhen Skrabets was sentenced to one day in jail for distributing materials on April 25. Police also arrested Hanna Bunko and Yauhen Rudy for distributing materials but subsequently released them without charge.

On May 5, authorities detained for five hours and subsequently expelled three leaders of the Perspektiva small business association from the city of Brest. The leaders were scheduled to lead a protest against a beer sales ban at kiosks.

Opposition youth were often targeted for rallying and posting political banners. On April 17, police in Brest held five European Belarus campaigners in jail overnight and fined each of them BYR 70,000 (\$25) for organizing a Solidarity Day rally. On June 30, police detained European Belarus campaigners Maksim Vinyarski and Uladzimir Kumets overnight; both were subsequently fined BYR 350,000 (\$125) on July 1 and released. Their associate Maksim Sergiyets was fined BYR 875,000 (\$305) on similar charges on June 24 and BYR 700,000 (\$250) on September 14 for participating in the September 9 protest. Vinyarski was again held in custody overnight on September 21 and released on September 22 with a BYR 1,050,000 (\$375) fine.

Authorities continued to pursue cases against 14 opposition youth leaders who were sentenced or fined for participating in a January 2008 entrepreneur demonstration in Minsk. In April 2008 a court sentenced Artsyom Dubski, Alyaksei Bondar, Mikhail Kryvau, Mikhail Pashkevich, Alyaksandr Straltsou, Alyaksandr Charnyshou, and Tatsyana Tsishkevich to two years of "restricted freedom," and Andrei Kim to 18 months in prison. Anton Koipish and Uladzimir Siargeyeu each received fines of BYR 3,500,000 (\$1,600). In May 2008 activists Paval Vinahradau and Mikhail Subach were also sentenced to two years of "restricted freedom" on the same charges, and a minor named Maksim Dashuk, received an 18-month sentence of partial house arrest. In October 2008 police arrested Alyaksandr Barazenska upon his return to Belarus and in December a court sentenced him to one year of partial house arrest. On February 13, police arrested Artsyom Dubski upon his arrival to Belarus for violating his previous house arrest sentence. On April 15, authorities released Dubski pending trial, and on July 7, a court sentenced him to one year of imprisonment. On June 15, a Minsk court tried a minor named Maksim Dashuk for breaching his original 18-month partial house arrest; Dashuk's 18-month sentence was ultimately extended by approximately one month. On June 15, the court also adjusted the sentences of Alyaksandr Straltsou and Alyaksandr Charnyshou, required them to pay 15 percent of their salaries to the government, and banned them from traveling abroad. Tatsyana Tsishkevich, Alyaksei Bondar, and Mikhail Kryvau remained abroad and would face charges if they returned to the country. Authorities amnestied Alyaksandr Straltsou, Alyaksandr Barazenska, Mikhail Subach, Mikhail Pashkevich, and Paval Vinahradau during the year and released Andrei Kim from prison in August 2008 following a presidential pardon.

In July 2008 authorities detained more than 15 opposition and human rights activists in connection with a July 4 bombing in central Minsk that injured 50 persons. They were released without charge after 10 days. Vyasna criticized the arrests and accused the KGB of using the incident as a pretext to detain and question activists and intimidate their family members. Interior Ministry officials would not confirm the total number of persons detained or released. Investigations into the bombing continued at year's end, and during the year police continued to summon local residents for mandatory fingerprinting.

Amnesty

On May 5, Lukashenka signed a new amnesty law. According to the Interior Ministry, the amnesty was expected to apply to approximately 30,000 convicts, of whom 4,500 could be released. As of November 7, 2,216 convicts were released from prisons. More than 9,300 persons had their jail terms reduced by one year, and another 1,000 had their convictions commuted.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, the government did not respect judicial independence in practice. Corruption, inefficiency, and political interference were prevalent in the judiciary.

There was evidence that prosecutors and courts convicted individuals on false and politically motivated charges and that executive and local authorities dictated the outcomes of trials.

The criminal justice system has three tiers: district courts, regional courts, and the Supreme Court. A Constitutional Court is empowered to adjudicate constitutional issues and to examine the legality of laws; however, in practice it was subservient to the executive branch.

The president appoints six of the 12 members of the Constitutional Court, including the chairman, as well as the chairmen of the Supreme Court and the Supreme Economic Court. He also has the authority to appoint and dismiss all district and military judges. Judges depended on executive branch officials for personal housing.

Prosecutors are organized into offices at the district, regional, and national levels. They answer to and serve at the pleasure of the prosecutor general, who is appointed by the president. Prosecutors are not independent and do not have authority to bring charges against the president or members of his executive staff.

A 2006 report by the UN special rapporteur on Belarus described the authority of prosecutors as "excessive and imbalanced" because they can extend detention without the permission of judges. The report also noted an imbalance of power between the prosecution and the defense. Defense lawyers were unable to examine investigation files, be present during investigations, or examine evidence against defendants until a prosecutor formally brought the case to court. Lawyers found it difficult to call some evidence into question because technical expertise was under the control of the prosecutor's office. According to many defense attorneys, these imbalances of power had intensified at the beginning of the year, especially in relation to politically motivated criminal and administrative cases. There were very few cases in which criminal defendants were found innocent.

By presidential decree bar associations are independent; however, they remained subordinate to the Ministry of Justice in practice. Lawyers must be licensed by the ministry, are required to work in regional bar associations, and must renew their licenses every five years. The law prohibits attorneys from private practice, although private legal companies are allowed to provide legal assistance and advice to private companies and represent their clients in economic courts. Unlike in previous years, there were no reports during the year that authorities revoked lawyers' licenses for defending NGOs or opposition political parties.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the presumption of innocence; however, in practice defendants frequently had to prove their innocence. The law also provides for public trials; however, trials were occasionally closed and frequently held in judges' offices. Judges adjudicate all trials; there is no system of trial by jury. However, in the case of grave crimes, a judge adjudicates the trial with the assistance of two civilian advisors.

Defendants have the right to attend proceedings, confront witnesses, and present evidence on their own behalf; however, in practice these rights were not always respected.

During the year numerous opposition politicians and NGO leaders were tried and convicted without the right to be present at their trials. On January 26, European Belarus activist Marta Maiseyenko was fined in absentia BYR 175,000 (\$65) for displaying an opposition flag. On March 14, a court in Homyel notified Belarusian Christian Democrats Yauhen Yakavenka and Zmitser Kudasau that they had been fined BYR 700,000 (\$250) and BYR 1,050,000 (\$370), respectively, in absentia for participating in an unsanctioned demonstration on February 21.

On March 17, a court tried and convicted three members of the Hrodna-based Union of Poles, Andrzej Paczobut, Ihar Bantsar, and Mechyslau Yaskevich, for holding an unauthorized demonstration on January 17. Bantsar and Yaskevich were tried and convicted in absentia, while Paczobut was present for the proceedings. Each was sentenced to fines of BYR 525,000 (\$185). A court rejected their appeal on March 27.

The law provides for access to legal counsel for detainees and requires that courts appoint lawyers for those who cannot afford one; however, at times these rights were not respected, and some detainees were denied access to a lawyer as well as to a Belarusian interpreter in case they requested hearings in the Belarusian language. Most judges and prosecutors were not fluent in Belarusian. The law provides for the right to choose legal representation freely; however, a presidential decree prohibits members of NGOs from representing individuals other than members of their organizations in court.

Courts often allowed information obtained from forced interrogations to be used against defendants.

Defendants have the right to appeal court decisions, and most defendants appealed their criminal convictions. In an appeal, defendants and witnesses seldom appeared before the court and the court usually reviewed the protocol and other documents from a lower court trial. In the vast majority of cases, upper courts upheld the verdicts found in the lower court.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

On February 13, police arrested Artsyom Dubski upon his arrival in the country for violating his previous house arrest sentence. Dubski was initially charged for participating in a peaceful demonstration of entrepreneurs in Minsk in January 2008. On April 15, authorities released Dubski pending trial, and on July 7 a court sentenced him to one year's imprisonment. On November 27, authorities rejected Dubski's request for parole, and he remained in prison at year's end.

On February 8, riot police in Vaukavysk arrested two former political prisoners and entrepreneurs, Mikalai Autukhovich and Yury Lyavonau, and their associate, Uladzimir Asipenka, in armed raids. On February 18, the three were charged with alleged deliberate destruction of property, arson, and illegal arms possession. On June 23, Autukhovich was additionally charged with terrorism. Investigators extended their probe every three months to hold the activists in custody pending trial. Authorities released former political prisoner Lyavonau on August 8 and dropped all the criminal charges against him on September 24. At year's end Autukhovich and Asipenka remained in pretrial holding facilities.

Authorities continued to harass former political prisoners and detainees with short-term detentions and jail sentences. For example, on March 20, police arrested Artur Finkevich for alleged use of obscenities. He remained in custody until court hearings on March 23 and was fined BYR 525,000 (\$180). Finkevich had previously served more than two years in prison for writing political graffiti.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The law provides that individuals can file lawsuits seeking damages for, or cessation of, a human rights violation; however, the civil judiciary was not independent and was rarely impartial in such matters.

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

The law prohibits such actions; however, the government did not respect these prohibitions in practice. Under the law, persons who obstruct members of law enforcement in the performance of their duties, including actions that in principle may be illegal, could be penalized or charged with an administrative offense. Such obstruction includes any effort to

prevent KGB officers from entering the premises of a company, establishment, or organization, and refusing to allow KGB audits or to deny or restrict KGB access to information systems and databases.

The law requires a warrant for searches; however, the KGB and riot police entered homes, conducted unauthorized searches, and read mail without warrants. The KGB has authority to enter any building at any time, as long as it applies for a warrant within 24 hours after the entry. There were credible reports that government agents covertly entered homes of opposition activists and offices of opposition groups and monitored the actions of individuals.

There were numerous instances in which authorities searched residences and offices for clearly political reasons. For example, on February 5, police raided the residence of European Belarus activist Paval Yuhnevich and seized computer equipment, a video camera, and printed materials on the pretext of investigating a robbery. Yuhnevich and his associates Yauheni Afnahel, Uladzimir Ihnatovich, Marta Krylova, and Alyaksandra Lyndava were arrested and questioned about their activities for two hours.

On the eve of an opposition youth rally on February 14, police raided the apartment of Malady Front member Kasya Halitskaya without a warrant and confiscated European Union flags, signs, and political flyers. On February 14, police also searched the residence of Malady Front member Mikalai Dzemidzenka in Minsk and seized his personal computer.

On August 5, police searched the apartment of Belarusian Christian Democracy member Yury Zhylko in Zhodzina. The officers failed to find drugs that they were purportedly looking for and confiscated Christian, human rights, and other literature.

On September 6, the KGB and police confiscated a draft of Belarusian Christian Democracy cochair Paval Seviarynets' book *A Heart of Light* from his colleague's apartment.

The law prohibits authorities from intercepting telephone and other communications without a court order. In practice authorities monitored residences, telephones, and computers. Nearly all opposition political figures reported that authorities monitored their conversations and activities.

The law allows the KGB, the Internal Affairs Ministry, and certain border guard detachments to use wiretaps, but they must first obtain a prosecutor's permission. However, the lack of prosecutorial independence rendered these due process protections meaningless.

Ministry of Communications contracts for telephone service prohibited subscribers from using such services for purposes contrary to state interests and public order. The ministry has the authority to terminate telephone service of those who breach the law.

There were multiple cases of youth members of political opposition groups forcibly conscripted into the military. There were also reports of discrimination and harassment against them while undertaking military service.

In January authorities forcibly conscripted Franak Vyachorka, former leader of the Belarusian Popular Front's youth wing. Police arrested Vyachorka on a Minsk street and forcibly delivered him to the 8th Radar Brigade in Baranavichy. He took a military oath there on February 7 and was later transferred to a radar unit in Mazyr. In mid-December Vyachorka was sent back from a hospital to the military unit despite medical grounds for an early discharge from the army. Vyachorka's medical record was revised to omit his previous diagnosis.

In early December, Malady Front activist Ivan Shyla was granted an early discharge from the army for health reasons. In June 2008 the then 17-year-old Shyla was expelled from a secondary school in Salihorsk one day before his final graduation examination. The official grounds for Shyla's expulsion were that he had frequently violated the school's

regulations by participating in unsanctioned demonstrations and other opposition activities.

There were numerous reports that the government coerced young persons, university students, and military conscripts to join the pro-Lukashenka state-funded NGO Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU). In addition, the government employed and encouraged a widespread system of BRYU informants organized into civilian patrol squads, whose supposed purpose was to encourage students to become law-abiding citizens. During the year such squads continued to actively recruit youths and students for various projects around the country.

High school students feared that they would not be allowed to enroll in universities without BRYU membership, and university students reported that proof of BRYU membership was often required to register for popular courses or to receive a dormitory room. Universities also offered patrol members discounts on tuition. In January 2008 Minister of Education Alyaksandr Radzouk stated that membership in the BRYU would be considered in new mandatory recommendations for students who wished to train for professions in foreign affairs, state administration, and journalism.

During the year authorities continued to harass family members of NGO leaders and civil society activists. For example, Zmitser Dashkevich's parents were harassed on a number of occasions, including through a defamatory television program about their son's abduction. Authorities harassed and threatened members of the Belarusian Christian Democratic party and their families, and threatened them with expulsion and job dismissal in an effort to force them to recant their membership. For example, authorities warned Alena Chuzhak that her family could be evicted from their home because of her political activities.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press; however, the government did not respect these rights in practice and enforced numerous laws to control and censor the media.

Individuals could not criticize the government publicly without fear of reprisal. Authorities videotaped political meetings, conducted frequent identity checks, and used other forms of intimidation. Wearing masks, displaying unregistered flags, symbols, and placards bearing messages deemed threatening to the government or public order are also prohibited.

The law also limits free speech by criminalizing actions such as giving information to a foreigner about the political, economic, social, military, or international situation of the country that authorities deem to be false or derogatory.

On February 8, a new media law entered into force that allows authorities to further restrict press freedoms. The law subjects online news sources to the same regulations as print and broadcast media, requires reregistration of existing media before February 8, 2010, mandates accreditation of journalists, and limits support from foreign organizations to 30 percent. The new law was widely criticized by domestic and international NGOs and press advocates such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, Index on Censorship, Article IX, World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), and Civic Belarus.

There were independent newspapers and magazines and Internet news Web sites. However, they operated under repressive media laws and most faced discriminatory publishing and distribution policies.

State-owned media dominated the information field and maintained the highest circulation and viewership. The state-owned postal system, Belposhta, and the state-owned kiosk system, Belsayuzdruk, continued to refuse to deliver and sell 11 independent newspapers. In 2007 Belposhta removed three popular Russian newspapers (*Kommersant*, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*) from its subscription list. However, other Russian newspapers, including

Izvestiya, were distributed. Media analysts asserted that the newspapers were removed because of reporting critical of Lukashenka's policies.

Since November 2008 authorities allowed independent newspapers *Narodnaya Volya* and *Nasha Niva* and one regional newspaper to be distributed through state distribution systems after two- to three-year government bans. *Narodnaya Volya* also reached agreement with authorities for the newspaper to be printed at a state-owned press in Minsk. The newspaper previously was printed in Smolensk, Russia, due to government harassment. However, while both papers were publicly available, they were still subject to restrictions. In September the state-owned Belsayuzdruk printing company denied a request from the *Narodnaya Volya* to increase its circulation from twice a week to three times a week, claiming that it was "not possible to distribute additional copies due to the massive output of other periodicals" on that specific day of the week.

On October 12, the Information Ministry denied registration to the regional independent newspaper *Mahileuski Chas* on the grounds that its chief editor "had no higher education diploma." The paper's registration was denied on three separate occasions during the year.

On November 2, the Information Ministry refused to register the regional publication *Mar'ynahorskaya Gazeta* over its failure to secure a legal address, after local authorities pressured its landlord to terminate the newspaper's lease.

On November 10, the ministry denied registration to the regional independent newspaper *Prefekt Plus*, noting that the paper was located in residential premises, which violated the media law.

During the year the ministry twice rejected a registration application from regional newspaper *Salihorsk-plus*, claiming that the application did not comply with the media law regulations.

Local authorities frequently warned independent editors and journalists to avoid reporting on certain topics and not to criticize the government. Authorities also warned businesses not to advertise in newspapers that criticized the government.

On October 1, private radio station Avtoradio discontinued broadcasting an international, political, cultural news and music show, produced jointly with the European Radio for Belarus, after an Information Ministry warning that the station would be shut down.

On November 18, the Information Ministry released a statement that it had issued warnings to four national independent newspapers, including the *Nasha Niva* and the *Narodnaya Volya*, and noted that these newspapers could be closed for disseminating illegal information and other violations of the media law. Authorities sent a second warning to *Narodnaya Volya* on December 24 for allegedly publishing false information about media subscription rates in Minsk.

Journalists reporting for international media focused on the country, such as the Warsaw-based independent satellite channel Belsat and Polish radio station Radio Racyja, continued to receive warnings from the prosecutor's office for working without accreditation. After enactment of the new media law, authorities sent warnings to at least 20 independent journalists.

International media continued to operate in the country but not without interference and harassment. Euronews and Russian channels First Channel, NTV, and RTR were generally available, although only through paid cable services in many parts of the country. Their news programs were at times blocked or replaced with local programming. Broadcasts from other countries, including Poland and Lithuania, could be received in parts of the country, usually along the border.

On April 1, the government suspended broadcasting of five popular Russian channels, including TV Center International and Ren TV. These channels frequently broadcast critical and satirical pieces on Lukashenka. A representative of the

Information Ministry claimed that there were no political grounds behind the ban and asserted that cable providers had made a decision to remove the broadcasts based on economic calculations. The Russian channels also ostensibly failed to obtain permits under the media law for broadcasts in Belarus.

On December 8, the Foreign Affairs Ministry rejected a third registration application from Belsat. On November 30, the ministry issued accreditation to 12 journalists and technical personnel of the European Radio for Belarus after the Council of Ministers registered the station's local bureau for a period of one year on November 11.

The government continued to harass, assault, and arrest journalists.

A court in Homyel fined independent journalists Zmitser Karmazin and Aleh Razhkov BYR 700,000 (\$250) each for participating in the International Mother Language Day rally on February 21. On July 8 in Homyel, police detained Razhkov for three hours and questioned about him over his coverage of an entrepreneur rally that day. Police searched his belongings and copied the photographs taken at the event.

On April 16, law enforcement officers detained and beat independent correspondent Uladzimir Grydzin while he was photographing a police precinct on fire in Minsk. On April 21, independent journalist Ales Lyubianchuk was fined BYR 770,000 (\$275) for allegedly resisting police during his detention on April 16.

On August 14, authorities deported two Russian journalists from the television station NTV for filming a documentary about the 1999-2000 high-profile disappearances. KGB officers questioned the journalists and seized their electronic equipment and printed materials.

Security officers continuously hampered independent journalists from covering Solidarity Day and other protests in Minsk. On July 16, police detained photojournalist Vadzim Zamirouski for three hours. On September 9 and 16, officers surrounded each journalist present and violently blocked them from filming the police crackdown on the demonstrations. Journalists who were covering the event reported that police damaged a camera of a Polish TVP correspondent. Police also detained independent journalists for long periods allegedly to check their identification. At an October 16 demonstration, riot police seized cameras and damaged journalists' equipment. The BAJ condemned interference with the independent journalists' operations and called for fair and open investigations into the incidents.

On October 22, Deputy Interior Minister Yauheni Poludzen stated that the government would take measures to ensure that police did not obstruct journalists. According to Poludzen, ministry press officers would attend future mass public events, and media representatives would have to refer to them for any questions about the event. On November 27, Interior Minister Anatol Kulyashou echoed his deputy's remarks, noting that the ministry would like to pursue "businesslike and open relations" with media.

The government censored the media. Many publications were forced to exercise self-censorship. Authorities warned, fined, or jailed members of the media who publicly criticized the government.

The government tightly controlled the content of domestic broadcast media. In April 2007 the president stated that control of radio and television stations remained a high priority for the government and that private stations would not be allowed to operate in the country. He also stated that state publishing houses would never sign contracts with independent media publications that violated media laws. On April 9, the president reiterated his earlier remarks and dismissed concerns about "the closure of the Russian channels."

Only the state-run radio and the state-run television networks ONT, the First National Channel, STV, and LAD were allowed to broadcast nationwide. The government continued to use its virtual monopoly on television and radio

broadcasting to disseminate its version of events and minimize all opposing viewpoints. State television coordinated its propaganda documentaries with the country's security services.

Local independent television stations operated in some areas and reported local news; however, most were under government pressure to forego reporting on national issues or risk being censored. Such stations were frequently pressured into sharing materials and cooperating with authorities to intimidate local opposition and human rights groups that met with foreign diplomats.

Many independent outlets practiced self-censorship. On February 16, a local television channel in Brest denied a request from opposition and trade union members to show their program about economic and social difficulties in Belarus.

Under the law, the government may close a publication after two warnings in one year for violating a range of restrictions on speech and the press. In addition, regulations give authorities arbitrary power to prohibit or censor reporting. The Information Ministry can suspend periodicals or newspapers for three months without a court ruling. The law also prohibits the media from disseminating information on behalf of unregistered political parties, trade unions, and NGOs.

Under the law, libel is a criminal offense. Slandering and insulting the president and public officials carry large fines and prison sentences of up to four years. The libel law makes no distinction between private and public persons concerning defamation of character. A public figure who was criticized for poor performance while in office may sue both the journalist and the media outlet that disseminated the critical report.

The government took numerous other actions during the year to limit the independent press, including limiting access to newsprint and printing presses. Several independent newspapers, including *Vitsyeb'ski Kuryer* and *Tavarysch*, printed materials in Russia because domestic printing presses (mostly state-owned) refused to print them. Other independent newspapers, such as *Salidarnasc* and *BDG*, disseminated Internet-only versions due to printing and distribution restrictions.

On February 25, a court in Brest declared in a closed-door hearing that the popular independent history magazine *ARCHE* published "extremist" materials. KGB officers confiscated copies of the magazine from an independent journalist in October 2008 and claimed that the publication, and particularly articles critical of the 2008 parliamentary elections, "discredited state activities, incited social and political tension," and "posed a threat to Belarus' security." Following numerous appeals, the KGB dropped the charges on June 23.

After authorities ordered the Hrodna-based independent newspaper *Gazeta Slonim'skaya* to vacate its rented premises by June 2008, its editor, Viktor Uladashchuk, stated that he could not lease a new office because rental agencies feared government reprisals. At year's end its journalists continued to work from their homes.

During the year there were numerous examples of the government confiscating independent and opposition newspapers and seizing leaflets and other materials deemed to have been printed illegally.

On June 23, traffic police in Schuchyn detained Union of Poles Deputy Chairperson Mechyslau Yaskevich, along with organization members and journalists Andrzej Paczobut, Ihar Bantsar, and Andrzej Pisl'nik. Police seized 100 copies of the unregistered newspaper *Glos znad Niemna na uchodzstwie* and the Union of Poles' magazine *Magazyn Polski na uchodzstwie* from them "for further examination" by the local ideology department. Issues of the magazine featured a satirical portrait of Lukashenka on the front page.

On July 17, police officers banned eight opposition activists from distributing the independent weekly *Novy Chas* at the heavy machinery factory BelAZ in Zhodzina and confiscated 500 copies of the newspaper. Police also detained two of the activists, Raman Bahdanau and Alyaksandr Serhiyenka, for several hours.

On November 11 and 13, police detained and questioned for more than three hours democratic activist Barys Khamayda in Vitsyebsk in an apparent bid to prevent him from distributing independent publications. Officers examined his printed materials and released him without charge.

Internet Freedom

The government partially restricted access to the Internet, and monitored e-mail and Internet chat rooms. Many individuals and groups were generally able to engage in the peaceful expression of views via the Internet, including by e-mail.

The authorities freely monitored Internet traffic. Internet cafe owners were required to maintain records of their customers and submit them to government security services. By law Beltelekam and other organizations authorized by the government had the exclusive right to maintain Internet domains.

In December the Council of Ministers drafted a bill that would provide for registration of all Internet media outlets and identification of all Internet users and would allow authorities to block access to "extremist" and other objectionable Web sites. The bill, which was not subject to public discussion, would also make Internet service providers accountable for information released by customers. On December 30, Lukashenka stated that the government should "establish order" on the Internet to "rigidly regulate and hold responsible" Internet users.

On March 27, the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Filaret, called upon the government to effectively regulate the Internet and control access to its "dangerous resources." In addition, he stated that the government could apply "practices used in other countries, in particular, China."

Approximately 30 percent of the population had access to the Internet, and Internet use was highest in urban areas. Access was restricted by relatively high costs and lack of high-speed services. On occasion state providers blocked independent and opposition Web sites during major political events.

On June 8, authorities blocked the Web site of human rights group Charter97 after it posted a satirical show about Lukashenka and other materials criticizing the government.

On February 8, a new media law entered into force. Under the law, the government may legally block any unregistered Web sites, regardless of their origin.

In response to the government's interference and Internet restrictions, many opposition groups and independent newspapers switched to Internet domains operated outside the country. The few remaining independent media sites with domestic ".by" domains practiced heavy self-censorship.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government restricted academic freedom and cultural events. Educational institutions were required to teach an official state ideology that combined reverence for the achievements of the former Soviet Union and the country under the leadership of Lukashenka. Use of the word "academic" was restricted; NGOs were prohibited from including the word "academy" in their titles.

On October 22, Deputy Education Minister Tatsiana Kavalyova stated that ideology remained "the backbone" of education in the country and gave "special flavor to the educational environment." She also noted that every educational institution maintained an ideology department.

During the year authorities dismissed teachers on political grounds. For example, the Brest state university pressured Aleh

Halenka, a senior professor with 30 years of experience and a member of the Free Trade Union, to voluntarily resign on August 31. University authorities subsequently pressured 10 other professors to disavow their membership in the union.

On March 25, the private School of Languages dismissed an English teacher, Marjana Gruzdilovich. She had reportedly told a student who had made disparaging remarks about opposition demonstrations and activists that she participated in a number of protests as well. Following a significant outcry in the independent media, Gruzdilovich was reinstated on March 31.

Government-mandated textbooks contained a heavily propagandized version of history and other subjects. All schools, including private institutions, are considered political bodies that must follow state orders and cannot be headed by opposition members. The education minister has the right to appoint and dismiss the heads of private educational institutions.

The government tasked BRYU, the pro-Lukashenka, state-funded youth organization, with ensuring ideological purity among students. University students reportedly were pressured to join the BRYU to receive benefits and rooms in dormitories. Local authorities also pressured BRYU members to campaign on behalf of government candidates. In addition, authorities at times pressured students to act as informants for the country's security services.

According to an education ministry directive, educational institutions may expel students who engage in antigovernment or unsanctioned political activity and are to maintain the proper ideological education of students. During the year at least three students were expelled for politically motivated reasons, compared with at least 10 students in 2008, 20 students in 2007, and more than 100 in 2006. Some school officials continued to cite poor academic performance or absence from classes as reasons for the expulsions.

In May Malady Front activist and first-year finance student Pyotr Ruzau was expelled from his university in Baranavichy after being convicted of painting political graffiti. On June 1, following extensive media coverage, the university reinstated Ruzau.

On July 13, the Belarus State University expelled Belarusian Popular Front youth group member Paval Chuduk, a second-year theological student. Chuduk had been accused of participating in political activities after his trip to Sweden to observe the European Parliament elections.

Following her return from Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum in Brussels on November 16-17, the Belarusian State University expelled Malady Front activist Tatsyana Shaputska. Although the foreign minister claimed that she was expelled for poor attendance, Shaputska was reportedly told that the reason for her expulsion was that she failed to gain permission for the trip from the law faculty dean.

The government continued to ban teachers and democratic activists from promoting the wider use of the Belarusian language. On September 1, a school in Minsk fired Belarusian-speaking astronomy and physics teacher Tatsiana Ulanava, a member of the Belarusian Conservative Christian Party.

The government also harassed activists attempting to promote Belarusian language and culture. In Homyel on February 23, a court sentenced Kastus Zhukouski to seven days in jail and three other activists to fines of up to BYR 1,750,000 (\$625) for participating in an unauthorized International Mother Language Day on February 21. On March 4, civil society activist Andrus Papou was fined BYR 525,000 (\$185) on the same charges. On September 15, the Right Alliance youth group was denied permission to hold a protest in a remote park in Minsk to promote education in the Belarusian language. On October 14, police in Baranavichy arrested two youth activists for collecting signatures in support of the Belarusian language and held them overnight in jail. They were released the following day with fines of BYR 350,000 each (\$125). On October 20, police detained Malady Front members Zmitser Dashkevich, Nasta Palazhanka, and Mikita Krasnou in Minsk

for the purpose of an identification check. In Karelichi on October 23, police briefly detained Malady Front activist Andrus Liaukovich and questioned him about the organization's Belarusian language campaign.

The government also restricted cultural events. During the year the government continued to force opposition theater groups into venues such as bars and private apartments and to suppress unofficial commemorations of historical events.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution provides for freedom of peaceful assembly; however, the government severely restricted this right in practice. Only registered political parties, trade unions, or NGOs may request permission to hold a demonstration of more than 1,000 persons, and denials were common. Security forces frequently forcibly dispersed participants, often causing injuries (see section 1.c.)

The law criminalizes participation in the activities of unregistered NGOs, training of persons to demonstrate, financing of public demonstrations, or solicitation of foreign assistance "to the detriment" of the country. Violations are punishable by up to three years in prison.

Organizers must apply at least 15 days in advance for permission to conduct a public demonstration, rally, or meeting. Government officials are required to respond no later than five days prior to the scheduled event. However, authorities generally refused permits to opposition groups or granted permits for demonstrations away from city centers.

On January 14, authorities denied antinuclear campaigners permission to hold a series of protests in the cities of Smarhon, Maladziechna, and Vileyka. Additionally, on April 19, Astravets town authorities did not permit the campaigners to arrange a public meeting on April 24 to discuss the government's plans to construct a nuclear power plant in the region.

Democratic activists asked to hold the annual March 25 Freedom Day demonstration and April 26 Chernobyl commemoration demonstrations in central Minsk. Authorities denied the activists permission to hold the demonstration in downtown Minsk and instead gave permission to demonstrate in a secluded park on the outskirts of the city.

Officials in Brest denied opposition political groups authorization to organize May 1 Labor Day marches. Authorities in Minsk refused requests from the European Belarus group to hold May 1 posters and collect signatures in support of Belarus' integration into the European Union.

On September 3, authorities denied opposition political groups permission to organize a monthly Solidarity Day picket line to mark the 10th anniversary of the high-profile disappearances. They had intended to assemble at the alleged site of the disappearances on September 16.

Authorities used intimidation and threats to discourage persons from participating in demonstrations, openly videotaped participants, and issued heavy fines or jail sentences on participants of unsanctioned demonstrations. Police and other security officials beat and detained demonstrators before, during, and after unsanctioned peaceful demonstrations.

On March 25, approximately 1,000 democratic activists peacefully demonstrated to mark the 91st anniversary of the country's declaration of independence. The Interior Ministry accused the demonstrators of violating traffic and "provoking" clashes with police officers in central Minsk. Police in full riot gear blocked a group of opposition youth from marching toward downtown Minsk.

In May riot police forcefully dispersed a series of daily demonstrations in downtown Minsk. More than 50 opposition youth protested the politically motivated arrests of Vaukavysk activists, and a number of the activists were assaulted on May 1.

On May 7, during a protest to mark the 10th anniversary of Zakharka's disappearance, police detained, questioned, and fingerprinted approximately 30 activists; some detainees reported that police beat them in police vehicles and at the police station. At a May 14 Malady Front "sovereignty rally," police forcefully dispersed peaceful protesters from the central square.

On May 16, Hrodna-based United Civic Party leader Yury Istomin reported that he was assaulted after a rally in Vaukavysk. Police identified but neither detained nor interrogated the alleged perpetrators.

On September 16, riot police dispersed an opposition Solidarity Day rally in downtown Minsk marking the 10th anniversary of high-profile disappearances. Police officers shoved approximately 35 activists into police buses. They also impeded journalists taking pictures of the dispersal. All detainees were subsequently released without charges; however, many reported being assaulted, harassed, threatened with physical abuse, and forced to give fingerprints.

On October 16, police again forcefully dispersed approximately 30 opposition activists at a Solidarity Day demonstration. United Civic Party Chair Anatol Lyabedzka reported that police beat him while he was being transported to the police precinct. Security forces blocked independent journalists and cameramen from covering the demonstration.

Police also used preemptive arrests and detentions to prevent protests. For example, a few hours before a planned prodemocracy demonstration on March 25, security forces abducted Malady Front members Nasta Palazhanka and Dzyanis Karnou and drove them approximately five miles outside of Minsk, where they were released. During the drive, police beat Karnou in the face and back.

In some instances the government encouraged and coordinated with progovernment groups to disrupt opposition demonstrations.

On February 3, three opposition youth in Homyel, including Belarusian Christian Democrat Kastus Zhukouski, were fined a total of BYR 9,100,000 (\$3,250) for staging an unsanctioned protest against politically motivated dismissals that same day. Police detained the activists, searched them, and reportedly harassed them at a precinct.

On February 13, Malady Front members Zmitser Dashkevich and Mikalai Dzemidzenka were fined BYR 1,400,000 (\$500) and BYR 1,225,000 (\$435), respectively, for holding a political picket the previous day. Dzemidzenka and two associates were fined BYR 1,575,000 (\$550) again on March 3 for rallying the previous day.

On March 27, a Vitsyebsk court convicted three Conservative Christian Party members of violating rules on mass demonstrations during a March 25 rally and fined them approximately BYR 700,000 (\$250).

On April 23, a judge sentenced Malady Front member Mikhas Iljin to 10 days in jail for an anticommunist protest in the vicinity of the Lenin monument in Brest on April 22.

Police arrested Homyel For Freedom movement coordinator Uladzimir Katsora on June 25 and held him in custody for three days. Four other opposition activists were also convicted and fined for holding a Solidarity Day protest on May 7.

On dozens of occasions during the year, authorities fined opposition activists and members of NGOs for participating in unauthorized protests. For example, on June 22, two opposition youth in Vitsyebsk were fined BYR 700,000 (\$250) for allegedly ignoring police orders to disperse during the April 26 Chernobyl March demonstration.

On October 13, a court convicted seven Homyel opposition activists for planning to stage a Solidarity Day demonstration

on September 16 and fined them approximately BYR 7,700,000 (\$2,740). The court also fined other activists on October 15 and October 19 for the same charges.

On December 3, a court in Minsk sentenced Young Belarus activists Paval Prakapovich and Yahor Babrou to 15 days in jail and Andrei Kuzminsky to seven days in jail. Their associate Nasta Mashchava was fined BYR 1,050,000 (\$360) on December 4. Police detained the four on December 2 for holding an unsanctioned picket against the regime's policies. Mashchava was charged with illegally taking pictures of the picket without press accreditation.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association; however, the government severely restricted it in practice.

The government enforced laws and registration regulations to restrict the operation of independent associations that might be critical of the government. All NGOs, political parties, and trade unions must register with the Ministry of Justice. A government commission reviews and approves all registration applications; in practice its decisions have been based largely on political and ideological compatibility with the government's authoritarian philosophy.

Registration procedures required applicants to provide the number and names of founders, along with a legal address in a nonresidential building. Individuals listed as members are vulnerable to retribution. The government's refusal to rent office space to unregistered organizations and the expense of renting private space forced most organizations to violate the nonresidential address requirement. This allowed authorities to deregister existing organizations and deny their reregistration.

During the year the government denied registration to numerous NGOs and political parties on a variety of pretexts, including by citing "technical" problems with applications. Authorities frequently harassed and intimidated organization founders to abandon their membership in groups seeking registration to deny the group the number of petitioners necessary for registration. During the year the government denied registration to more than a dozen NGOs and three political parties. Many of these groups had previously sought and been denied registration on multiple occasions. The government continued deregistering groups during the year, including a few regional NGOs.

On March 11, the Supreme Court turned down the second appeal to challenge the Justice Ministry's refusal to register an association called Haryzantal. The ministry claimed that it had conducted a forensic examination, which determined that one of the founding member's signatures was invalid, and thus the organization lacked the 10 signatures required for registration.

On May 29, the Supreme Court upheld the ministry's March denial of registration of the Hrodna-based regional chapter of the Belarusian Popular Front and the Adradzhenne NGO. The ministry claimed that registration applications contained numerous "technical" mistakes and that the groups failed to secure "a legal address."

On July 22, the Supreme Court upheld the Ministry of Justice's April denial of registration of the Belarusian Christian Democracy party, citing technical flaws in the party's registration documents. The government had refused two previous registration attempts in 2007 and 2008. The party again attempted to register in early December, and the Justice Ministry once again denied registration on the grounds that the party had allegedly provided false information about its founders.

On August 12, the Supreme Court rejected a registration denial appeal by prominent human rights NGO Vyasna. This was the third denial since the government stripped Vyasna's registration in 2003. The Justice Ministry stated that the NGO failed to document the precise meaning behind its name and asserted that many of its founders had administrative or criminal records that made them inappropriate advocates for human rights work.

On October 20, the ministry declined a registration request from the Belarusian Party of Working People, claiming the party did not meet the minimum required number of founders. The list of founders also allegedly contained fraudulent information.

On December 29, the Brest Regional Court turned down an appeal filed by the Brestskaya Vyasna human rights NGO to challenge its fifth registration denial of the year.

During the year the Ministry of Justice again reported that it continued to issue written warnings to NGOs, political parties, and trade unions. Harassment in the form of inspections by security officials and confiscation of political literature, usually without warrants continued.

c. Freedom of Religion

The law provides for freedom of religion; however, the government restricted this right in practice. While the constitution affirms the equality of religions and denominations, it also contains restrictive language, stipulating that cooperation between the state and religious organizations "is regulated with regard for their influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and country traditions of the Belarusian people." In 2008 Lukashenka described the Belarusian Orthodox Church as the "main ideologist of our country," asserting that "we have never separated ourselves from the church."

The government continued to use restrictive provisions of the religion law to hinder or prevent activities of groups other than the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC). In particular, the law restricts the ability of religious organizations to provide religious education, requires governmental approval to import and distribute literature, and prohibits foreigners from leading religious organizations. A concordat and other arrangements with the government provide the BOC with privileges not enjoyed by other religious groups. The BOC is a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church and the only officially recognized Orthodox denomination in the country.

All religious matters are regulated by the Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationalities Affairs of the Council of Ministers (OPRRNA). Under the law, religious organizations must register either with OPRRNA or with local and regional governments. Only groups with 20 or more members may be registered as religious communities.

During the year OPRRNA refused to register some nontraditional religious groups, making their meetings illegal. At year's end OPRRNA reported that 25 religious denominations with 3,106 religious communities and 158 religious organizations were officially registered.

The Office of Religious Affairs continued to deny registration to what it considered nontraditional faiths, mainly Protestant groups such as the New Life Church and the Belarusian Evangelical Church. Most Christian communities continued to campaign for amendments to the religion law, which restricts their activities and allows criminal prosecution of individuals for their religious beliefs.

In early December the Minsk city prosecutor's office announced that it had resumed a criminal investigation against Yauhen Volkau, who was suspected of acting on behalf of an unregistered organization, a violation of the law. Authorities then announced they had closed the case on December 30. Volkau was suspected of representing the Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, which is banned in Belarus for "destructive" activities. The Unification Church was denied formal registration in Belarus in 1996 and 2001.

Under the law, residential property can be used for religious services only if it has been officially converted from residential use, which had the effect of forcing religious organizations to reregister properties where they wished to worship.

Authorities continued to reject reregistration requests from many Protestant churches and other nontraditional faiths. As a result, the groups often were forced to meet illegally or in the homes of individual members.

In April a Minsk-based Greek Catholic community unsuccessfully appealed to Lukashenka for a permission to construct a church.

In August the Navapolatsk local government turned down a request by the local Evangelical Faith Grace Church to purchase a plot of land to build a church.

The government continued to limit the ability of groups to own or use property for religious purposes. A property that is not registered makes religious activity there illegal.

During the year the government continued its efforts to harass and evict the New Life Church from its property on the outskirts of Minsk. On March 5, the appellate panel of the Supreme Economic Court upheld a January 13 decision to revoke the church's ownership of its property. On March 16, Minsk city government offered a one-acre plot at a different location that was four times smaller and insisted that the church sell its property below market value. The OPRRNA and Minsk city authorities claimed that the property was needed to construct a day-care center or a school. Senior Pastor Viachaslau Hancharenka announced on May 8 that the church community unanimously rejected the city administration's offer.

On October 1, authorities fined Hancharenka BYR 420,000 (\$150) for failing to allow fire-safety officers to inspect the church building on September 9. On October 7, the Minsk City Economic Court upheld the eviction of the New Life Church in a lawsuit filed by the local housing authorities. On December 8, an appellate court rejected the church's subsequent appeal. Since November 2007 the church maintained a policy of banning any officials from entering their premises in response to the government's continued attempts to appropriate their property.

The law allows persons to gather in private homes to pray but requires them to obtain permission from local authorities to hold rituals, rites, or ceremonies in homes. Police interfered with religious meetings in residences several times during the year and sometimes arrested and fined participants.

Baptists, Pentecostals, and other Protestants were warned or fined for illegally conducting religious services based on charges of disturbing public order or illegally gathering without prior permission.

According to various press reports in December, Mahilyou regional authorities urged the residents to inform ideology officers about unregistered religious organizations and their illegal activities, including services, literature distribution, and missionary work. In November a Protestant activist in Asipovichy, Mahilyou region, was fined for holding a Thanksgiving Day celebration at a private home. Police and ideology officers interfered in the celebration.

On October 28, authorities warned 10 members of the unregistered God's Embassy Church in Harbavichy that they could be held liable for holding a worship service at a private residence on October 25. Local ideology and police officers raided the house and confiscated religious literature.

On July 14, the New Generation Full Gospel Church in Baravanichy was fined BYR 350,000 (\$125) for holding an "illegal" Sunday morning prayer service on June 21. Also in Baranavichy on July 7, a court fined two members of a local Council of Baptist Churches BYR 700,000 (\$250) each for praying in a private home.

Authorities claimed that the New Testament Church had violated the religion law by allowing Barys Hrysenka, a visiting member of a Ukrainian Messianic Jewish organization, to speak at the church on May 21. Hrysenka was also fined BYR 105,000 (\$35) for participating as a foreigner in religious activities without permission.

The law allows citizens to speak freely about their religious beliefs; however, authorities continued to prevent, interfere with, or punish persons who proselytized for any religious group other than the BOC.

The government did not permit foreign missionaries to engage in religious activities outside of their host institutions. The law requires one-year, multiple-entry "spiritual activities" visas for foreign missionaries. Observers expressed concern that lack of standardized government guidance on implementing visa laws affected the ability of missionaries to live and work in the country.

In February 2008 the Council of Ministers introduced a directive that outlines the grounds for denying entry to foreign and stateless clergy invited by local religious organizations. The grounds include presenting false data in travel papers, lack of Belarusian or Russian language skills, a prior administrative offense conviction, and any previous denial of entry into the country. Foreign religious figures must also submit an increased number of documents that makes the process cumbersome.

The law also prohibits the establishment of offices by foreign organizations whose activities incite "national, religious, and racial enmity" or could "have negative effects on the physical and mental health of the people."

Foreign citizens officially in the country for nonreligious work can be reprimanded or expelled if they participate in religious activities. There were at least two such expulsions during the year.

The law does not provide for the return of property seized during the Nazi occupation or the Soviet period and restricts the return of property used for cultural or educational purposes. During the year, however, the government restituted six previously seized properties to the BOC and one such property to the Jewish community.

At year's end authorities still had not followed through on a commitment to find a new location for state archives stored in a former Roman Catholic monastery complex—the Bernadine Monastery—in central Minsk.

On July 15, the OPRRNA stated that the government could not return the former Roman Catholic monastery complex because it had nowhere to move the state archives.

Conscientious objectors to military service were harassed and prosecuted by authorities. On November 6, a court in Homyel fined Zmitser Smyk, a member of the local Jehovah's Witness Church, BYR 3.5 million (\$1,285) for evading the military draft. Smyk had attempted to secure a civilian service alternative to mandatory military service, under a provision of the constitution not enforced in practice. The prosecutor claimed that Smyk had no grounds to be exempted from military service due to his religious beliefs.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Jewish groups estimated that between 30,000 and 50,000 persons identify themselves as Jewish. Most Jews in the country were not religiously active.

During the year anti-Semitic incidents continued, and authorities sporadically investigated reports of such acts. Religious sites were vandalized, and some religious sites were destroyed to make way for commercial development. The government did not promote antibias and tolerance education.

In May local and international Jewish leaders appealed to the president to preserve a 19th-century wooden synagogue in Lyuban after local authorities demolished a similar synagogue in April, allegedly due to its poor condition and "lack of

historical or cultural value." Heritage preservation activists also protested the destruction and urged the government to erect a memorial sign at the site.

On June 2, 13 Jewish gravestones were reportedly vandalized at a cemetery in Barysau. Police opened a criminal investigation but failed to identify and penalize the perpetrators.

In October, Vaukavysk town authorities began laying water and sewage pipes on the site of a Jewish cemetery. During construction, workers unearthed human remains, and then quickly reburied them. Local authorities denied that any human remains had been disturbed. In a similar case in Mazyr, local authorities also denied that excavations were conducted at a site of a cemetery in May-August or that human remains were uncovered.

Jewish community and civil society activists continued to express concern over the concept of a "greater Slavic union" that was popular among nationalist organizations, including the neo-Nazi group Russian National Union (RNU), which remained active despite its official dissolution in 2000. In Navapolatsk the city prosecutor's office denied two appeals to investigate incidents of vandalism and painting swastikas on buildings during the year. Neo-Nazis were widely believed to be behind these and numerous other attacks across the country. The deputy chief of the Internal Affairs Ministry's Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Department, Andrei Saladounikau, acknowledged in 2008 there were a few neo-Nazi groups in the country. He maintained that the KGB monitored the groups and that they were "poorly organized and not popular among young people."

On April 22, anti-Semitic graffiti and swastikas were painted on walls of a synagogue in Vitsyebsk.

On May 9, vandals set fire to wreaths and flowers laid at the memorial to Holocaust victims in Brest. The memorial had been vandalized many times since it was unveiled in 1992. No vandals were convicted for the attacks. On that same day, RNU activists harassed local opposition youth members in Navapolatsk. Police made no attempt to interfere.

In July vandals painted anti-Semitic graffiti and a swastika on a building in eastern Minsk. Another anti-Semitic slogan appeared on a residential building in central Minsk. On July 25, vandals painted a swastika and anti-Semitic slogans on a memorial to Jews murdered by the Nazis in Slutsk in 1943. This was the third vandal attack on the memorial erected in 2007.

In July a Jewish community in Pinsk repeatedly voiced concern about the destruction of the Karalin historic Jewish neighborhood in the city center. Karalin was a sacred place where Hasidic Judaism originated. Despite numerous appeals to the Culture Ministry, authorities demolished the majority of the buildings in Karalin for construction of facilities for the local university.

On September 8, a KGB deputy chairperson refused to open criminal cases to investigate numerous incidents of Nazi and anti-Semitic graffiti in Minsk, saying they were "acts of hooliganism."

In December 2008 a district court banned as "extremist" and "anti-Semitic" 13 religious books and other materials published and distributed by the Minsk-based Christian Initiative Company. In a related development the Prosecutor General's Office revoked the company's publishing and retail licenses and seized 50,000 booklets, which authorities said incited hatred between Orthodox Christians and Jews.

On June 18, the KGB press office announced that it had limited access to eight local and three foreign Web sites allegedly promoting radical religious extremism. However, anti-Semitic and Russian ultranationalist newspapers and literature, DVDs, and videotapes imported from Russia continued to be sold in the country.

For a more detailed discussion, see the *2009 International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf.

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

The law provides for freedom of movement, including the right to emigrate. However, the government at times restricted the right of its citizens to foreign travel. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and persons of concern.

In January 2008 a presidential decree replaced exit stamps with a computerized, government database to verify the validity of passports and to track citizens who travel abroad. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the database contains the names of at least 100,000 persons who are prohibited from foreign travel, including those who possess state secrets, are facing criminal prosecution or civil suits, or have outstanding financial commitments. Opposition politicians and civil society activists criticized the database, saying it restricted freedom of travel. Some persons were informed by letter that their names were in the database; others were informed at border crossings. In some cases opposition activists were either turned away at the border or detained for lengthy searches. For example, on April 16, border guards blocked Artur Finkevich from leaving Belarus to attend a meeting with a foreign embassy in Vilnius.

On October 13, border guards detained and thoroughly searched United Civic Party leader Anatol Lyabedzka at the Polish border. The following day border guards again searched Lyabedzka and former political prisoner Alyaksandr Kazulin at the Lithuanian border. Guards also detained and searched Lyabedzka October 7 and again on November 11.

On October 4, police spent two and one-half hours searching Belarusian Popular Front Chairperson Ales Yanukevich at Minsk airport, causing him to miss his flight to London. On December 10, customs officers at Minsk airport thoroughly searched the luggage of Anatol Lyabedzka and the Belarusian Popular Front leader Ales Yanukevich upon their return from Germany. Customs officers reportedly made copies of all printed material found in the luggage and confiscated some of the documents.

Under a presidential decree, any student who wishes to study abroad must obtain permission from the minister of education. The decree, ostensibly intended to counter trafficking in persons, also requires the Ministry of Interior to track citizens working abroad and travel agencies to report individuals who do not return from abroad as scheduled.

The law also requires persons who travel to areas within 15 miles of the border to obtain an entrance pass.

The law does not allow forced exile, but sources assert that security forces threatened opposition leaders with bodily harm or prosecution if they did not leave the country. The law allows internal exile, or *khimiya*, for persons convicted of crimes.

Many university students who had been expelled or were under threat of expulsion for their political activities opted for self-imposed exile. Since 2006 more than 500 students left the country to continue their studies at foreign universities.

Internal passports served as primary identity documents and were required for permanent housing, work, and hotel registration. Police continued to harass individuals who lived at a location other than the legal place of residence indicated in their internal passport.

Protection of Refugees

The country is a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Its laws provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees.

In practice the government provided some protection against expulsion or return of refugees to countries where their lives or freedom would be threatened. Since the beginning of asylum procedure in 1997 through October 1, 812 persons, including 205 children, received refugee status. Of those, 357 remained in Belarus. During the year 153 persons filed asylum applications. From 1997 to October 1, a total of 1,584 asylum seekers were filed. Refugees originated mainly from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Tajikistan, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan.

While all foreigners have the right to apply for asylum, authorities continued to occasionally refuse asylum applications from citizens of Russia. At times, immigration authorities and courts asserted that, under the terms of Belarus-Russia treaties on the union between the countries and on the equal rights of citizens in each country, Russian and Belarusian citizens have equal rights and the former can legally settle and obtain residence permit in Belarus based on their Russian citizenship. Nevertheless, immigration authorities did accept eight applications from Russian citizens during the first nine months of the year.

Asylum seekers have freedom of movement within the country but must reside in the region where they filed their applications for refugee status and in a place known to the authorities. According to sources, authorities often required asylum seekers to settle in rural areas. Change of residence is possible only with notification to authorities. Registered asylum seekers are issued certificates that serve as identification documents and protect them from expulsion. In accordance with the law, they must also register with local authorities to obtain internal passports.

Stateless Persons

According to a June 20 press report citing government statistics, there were approximately 8,000 stateless persons in the country.

Arbitrary detention of and violence against stateless persons generally were not problems. However, stateless persons faced discrimination in employment because authorities often required them to settle in rural areas and prohibited them from seeking jobs outside of the regions where they lived. In practice stateless persons could not change their region of residence.

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

The law provides the right for citizens to change their government peacefully; however, the government denied citizens this right in practice.

Since his election in 1994 to a five-year term as the country's first president, Lukashenka steadily consolidated power in the executive branch to dominate all branches of government. Flawed referenda in 1996 and 2004 amended the constitution to broaden his powers, extend his term in office, and remove presidential term limits. In March 2006 Lukashenka gained a third term through a fraudulent election.

The September 2008 parliamentary election fell significantly short of international standards for democratic elections, according to the final report by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights observation mission. Despite the president's stated intent to conduct a free and fair election, authorities impeded constitutionally guaranteed rights of expression, association, and assembly. All of the 110 candidates declared winners were supporters of Lukashenka's policies.

Elections and Political Participation

Prior to the 2008 election, Lukashenka stated his intention to hold transparent elections and said that election campaign laws were in fact being violated to accommodate Western demands for transparency and adherence to democratic standards. For example, election officials stated that they registered candidates despite errors on registration forms. In August Lukashenka reiterated his claim that he had ordered the results of the 2006 presidential election to be falsified from 93 percent to "some 80 percent." In response to his comments, opposition leaders petitioned the Prosecutor General's Office to begin an investigation into alleged fraud in the 2006 election. On November 9, the office announced that it had no evidence of any violations of the electoral code and would therefore not begin an investigation.

Throughout the 2008 campaign, opposition candidates reported inequities such as government restrictions on access to broadcast media and venues for campaign rallies. There were instances where state-owned printing houses refused to produce opposition leaflets. Supporters of opposition candidates also reported harassment by authorities, including seizure of campaign materials.

Despite a nominal increase in opposition representation, authorities continued to exclude opposition representatives from election commissions at all levels. The Central Election Commission had four opposition members in advisory, nonvoting roles. Opposition activists also made up less than 1 percent of commissioners in precinct election commissions.

Political parties continued to receive warnings for minor offenses under a law that allows authorities to suspend parties for six months after one violation and close them after two warnings. The law also prohibits political parties from receiving support from abroad and requires all political groups and coalitions to register with the Ministry of Justice.

In Mahilyou authorities registered a local office of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party Hramada on October 28. The Babruysk Hramada branch remained unregistered after a landlord terminated a lease agreement for the party's "legal address."

Police continued to detain members of the Communist Party for distribution of their independent newspaper Tavyarysch. On July 8 and 9, police detained party representatives for three hours in Kalinkavichy and Homyel and confiscated copies of their publication.

On September 30, police detained Anatol Lyabedzka, opposition Communist Party leader Syarhei Kalyakin, and at least four colleagues for distributing copies of the United Democratic Forces' anticrisis platform. Police confiscated their materials and released them after a three-hour detention.

Authorities continued to harass the unrecognized Union of Poles, its chairman Anzhelika Borys, and her associates (see section 6).

In January 2008 the Ministry of Justice filed a liquidation suit against the Belarusian Party of Communists; however, the party denied that there was a suit and registered 18 candidates for the 2008 legislative elections.

During the year there were multiple cases of youth members of political opposition groups forcibly conscripted into the military. There were also reports of discrimination and harassment against them while undertaking military service (see section 1.f.).

There were 35 women in the 110-member Chamber of Representatives and 19 women in the 64-member Council of the Republic. A woman chaired one of Chamber of Representative's 20 committees and there was one woman in the 40-member Council of Ministers.

No high level members of government or the National Assembly openly identified themselves as members of a minority, although several were ethnic Poles or members of other ethnic groups.

Section 4 Official Corruption and Government Transparency

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption; however, reports indicate officials continued to engage in corrupt practices. The World Bank's worldwide governance indicators reflected that corruption was a serious problem in the country. Prosecutor General Ryhor Vasilevich stated on June 23 that the majority of the corruption cases were related to accepting and soliciting bribes, fraud, and abuse of power.

In November the prosecutor general informed the Council of Ministers that the Ministries of Transport and Communications, Architecture and Construction, Education, Agriculture and Foodstuffs, Industry, and Energy were "most corruption-prone" and registered the highest number of corruption crimes. Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Syamashka acknowledged that senior officials had often refused to assist law enforcement agencies in investigating corruption crimes. He instructed the ministries to streamline their efforts to tackle corruption and secure effective operations of anticorruption departments.

The lack of transparency between the president's personal funds and official government accounts, and a heavy reliance on off-budget revenues, suggested corruption within the executive branch.

The January 2008 anticorruption law expanded the list of professions vulnerable to corruption, designated the Prosecutor General's Office as the coordinator of anticorruption efforts, and prohibited government officials from having foreign bank accounts or engaging in nepotism. On April 25, Lukashenka signed a decree broadening authority to investigate corruption cases from prosecutors to also include the Interior Ministry and the KGB.

The prosecutor general reported that during the year authorities registered 3,366 corruption crimes and identified 1,746 offenders. On June 4, the head of the State Control Committee stated that his office began investigating 59 economic crimes against government officials. On December 4, the Prosecutor General's Office announced that corruption had caused BYR 88 billion (\$30 million) worth of damage to the state from January to October and that 1,470 persons had been charged with corruption.

There were numerous corruption prosecutions during the year; however, prosecutions remained selective and were in some cases politically motivated.

On January 21, the prosecutor general announced the arrest of former chief of the Financial Investigations Department of the State Control Committee, Anatol Hramovich, for abuse of power, bribery, and customs duty evasion. Hramovich's case remained pending at year's end.

On February 17, a judge sentenced two Mahilyou State Control Committee officers to up to nine and one-half years in jail on charges of bribery and extortion of a foreign company's chief executive officer.

On March 11, KGB officers arrested the first deputy chairman of the Mazyr city government on bribery charges for taking money from a local private company to advance its interests and abuse of power. He was sentenced on December 31 to six years in jail and his property was ordered confiscated. In March the KGB opened a major corruption case against a number of senior-level Interior Ministry personnel in Homyel region. Authorities reportedly arrested and charged the officials with bribery and other corruption-related offenses.

On May 11, Ihar Radzyuk, the former Staubtsy town government chairperson, was sentenced to four years in prison for abuse of power. His deputy, Ihar Komar, was jailed for three and one-half years in the case.

On May 13, a court in Malaryta sentenced two senior customs officials to seven years in prison for bribery and ordered their personal property confiscated. On August 26, a court sentenced another customs officer to five years in jail on similar charges.

On October 28, the senior member of the progovernment Liberal Democratic Party and former Minsk city government member, Uladzimir Karunas, was imprisoned for five years and his property ordered confiscated for bribery and complicity in fraud.

On November 16, a court sentenced Syarhey Novik, one of the leaders of the Interior Ministry's cybercrime department, to 12 years in jail and ordered his personal property confiscated over thefts from automated teller machines.

The law, government policies, and a presidential decree severely restrict public access to government information. Citizens had some access to certain categories of information on government databases and Web sites; however, much of the information was neither current nor complete.

Section 5 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

There were a number of active domestic human rights NGOs; however, authorities were often hostile to their efforts, did not cooperate with them, and were not responsive to their views. Three prominent human rights NGOs, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the Center for Human Rights, and the Innovative Foundation for Legal Technologies, remained registered in the country. A variety of unregistered NGOs, including Vyasna, Charter97, Committee for the Protection of the Repressed "Solidarity," Human Rights Alliance, Legal Assistance to Population, and "For Religious Freedom," continued to operate in spite of systematic harassment from authorities.

Authorities harassed both registered and unregistered NGOs with frequent inspections and threats of deregistration and monitored their correspondence and telephone conversations. The government ignored reports issued by human rights NGOs and rarely met with them. State-run media did not report on human rights NGOs and their actions; independent media that reported on human rights issues were subject to closure and harassment.

On April 26, police searched the offices of human rights group Charter97 and obstructed its live coverage of a Chernobyl-related demonstration.

The government refused to register and continued to harass NGOs under article 193 of the criminal code, which criminalizes organizing or participating in any activity by an unregistered organization. The law also prohibits persons from acting on behalf of unregistered NGOs. Since 2006 courts convicted 17 persons of crimes under article 193.1. Several domestic and international human rights groups, including Amnesty International, continued to urge the government to abolish article 193 and remove other legal obstacles that hinder the work of NGOs and allow official harassment of civil society and youth activists.

In August the prosecutors in Brest warned Mikhas Iljin that he could be held criminally liable for participating in the Malady Front, an unrecognized organization. His associate received a similar warning in Brest in December.

On November 13, the Prosecutor General's Office issued a warning to a group of 15 human rights advocates and civil society leaders that they could face criminal liability under article 193 for their participation in an unregistered organization. The group, dressed as Santa Clauses, handed the prosecutor's office a statement saying that they were participants "in an unregistered association of Santa Clauses" and planned to organize New Year celebrations, distribute "gifts, including among minors," and extend their wishes of "happy New Year at meetings and through the media."

In December 2008 the Ministry of Justice approved the registration of the civil society NGO For Freedom led by former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich. The ministry had previously denied three registration applications, citing as reasons improper payment of registration fees, irregularities in the group's charter, organizing an unapproved open-air rally, and technical flaws in registration documents. On March 24, the ministry authorized the For Freedom movement to establish regional offices and media outlets and to conduct polling. On April 7, police confiscated office property from the residential premises rented by the For Freedom movement in Minsk. According to Milinkevich, court officers inventoried all the property in the apartment in November 2008 on the pretense that a person involved in a criminal case had lived there 10 years prior.

While the government continued to reject the vast majority of NGO registration requests during the year, at least two organizations, including the Center for the Chernobyl Initiatives and the Association of Small and Medium-Sized Businesses, successfully registered.

Authorities can close an NGO after issuing only one warning that it violated the law. The most common violations that prompted a warning or closure were failure to obtain a legal address and technical discrepancies in application documents. The law allows authorities to close an NGO for accepting illegal forms of foreign assistance and permits the Ministry of Justice to participate in any NGO activity and review all NGO documents. NGOs also must submit detailed reports annually to the ministry about their activities, office locations, officers, and total number of members.

In April 2008 a presidential order took effect that increased rent 10-fold for most NGOs. Prior to the order, NGOs paid one euro (\$1.40) per square foot for office space, compared to 10 euros (\$14) charged to commercial groups. While some groups, including youth sports groups, charity organizations, and children's arts centers, continued to pay the one euro rate, other NGOs, such as the Belarusian Voluntary Society for Historic and Cultural Heritage Protection, were required to pay the higher rate. Many NGOs stated the higher rent would likely force them to close.

During the year the BHC continued to experience problems with authorities. In February 2008 the Supreme Court allowed the Ministry of Justice to withdraw a petition to suspend the BHC's activities. However, the NGO's bank accounts remained blocked, and alleged tax arrears were unresolved. The case originated in 2005, when authorities seized BHC office equipment as partial payment of BYR 191.5 million (approximately \$68,500) in alleged tax arrears and fines for back taxes on international donor funds dating from 2000-02. On October 19, the financial intelligence services requested income statements and other information from BHC members.

The KGB allegedly harassed NGO members by planting defamatory articles or information about them in the media. For example, on March 3, unknown persons left photographs containing digitally altered pornographic images of Union of Poles leader Anzhelika Borys at Borys' home and all neighboring apartments in the building. On December 1, unknown persons released a recording purportedly of Belarusian Christian Democrats cofounder Ryhor Dzmitruk in conversation with three prostitutes.

Authorities were reluctant to discuss human rights with international NGOs, whose representatives often had difficulty gaining admission to the country. For example, on February 27, authorities refused to issue visas to representatives of the Polish Stefan Batory Foundation and another foreign institute seeking to participate in a civil society conference. The government denied a visa to the president of the International Federation for Human Rights, Souhayr Belhassen, who sought to observe the Vyasna appeal hearings before the Supreme Court on August 10. In September authorities prohibited Swedish independent media expert Joanna Kurash from traveling to the country as a member of an international media experts' delegation.

Authorities routinely ignored NGO recommendations on how to improve the human rights situation in the country and their requests to stop harassing the NGO community.

On October 22, the first deputy chairperson of the Presidential Administration, Natalia Pyatkevich, held a meeting with the BHC, BAJ, and other human rights advocates as part of the process for government's preparations to draft a report for the Universal Periodic Review by the UN Human Rights Council. She stated that the government "was not politically" ready to liberalize legal practices related to civil society or take steps to improve the country's human rights record.

In December 2007 the UN General Assembly for a second consecutive year adopted a resolution expressing deep concern over the human rights situation in the country, particularly the government's "persistent" harassment and prosecution of opposition activists and independent NGOs. The resolution also expressed concern that senior government officials were implicated in the disappearances of opposition figures Yury Zakharanka and Viktor Hanchar and businessman Anatol Krasouski in 1999 and television journalist Zmitser Zavadski in 2000, as well as the government's failure to hold a free and fair presidential election in 2006.

Section 6 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, or social status. In practice the government did not always protect these rights. Problems included violence against women and children; trafficking in persons; and discrimination against persons with disabilities, Roma, ethnic minorities, and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community.

Women

The law criminalizes rape in general but does not include prohibitions against spousal rape. Rape was a problem. However, most women did not report it due to shame or fear that police would blame the victim. In 2007 the Ministry of Internal Affairs reported 306 cases of rape or sexual assault. According to the prosecutor general, the number of rape cases decreased 26 percent in January-September 2008 compared to the same period in 2007.

Domestic violence, including spousal abuse against women, was a significant problem. A 2006 Amnesty International report concluded that measures taken by authorities to protect women against domestic violence were insufficient. The criminal code does not contain a separate article dealing with domestic violence. According to a 2008 study released by the Belarus State University's Center for Sociological and Political Research, four out of five women between ages 18 and 60 claimed that they were subject to psychological violence in their families. One in four women suffered from physical violence, and 13.1 percent of women reported that they were sexually abused by their partners. Women remained reluctant to report domestic violence due to fear of reprisal and social stigma. According to the study, only 6 percent of male and 46 percent of female victims of domestic violence sought professional assistance. NGOs operated crisis shelters primarily in Minsk, but they were poorly funded and received only limited support from the government.

During the year the Minsk Family Welfare Center noted a rise in the number of male victims of domestic violence. In 2008 the center estimated that male victims comprised 30 percent of the total victims. According to the Interior Ministry, men accounted for 10 percent of all registered victims of domestic abuse.

Between January and October, the Interior Ministry registered more than 1,850 reports of domestic violence. Of these cases, 146 were murders and 316 were cases for severe physical injuries.

Prostitution is illegal, but it is an administrative--rather than a criminal--offense, and penalties are light. Officials and human rights observers reported that prostitution was not a significant problem. However, anecdotal evidence indicated that it was

growing, particularly in regions outside the main cities. There were prostitution rings in government-owned hotels, particularly in towns outside of Minsk. According to a senior interior ministry official, 1,730 persons were cited by police for prostitution-related activities, 560 of whom were in Minsk. Svyatlana Brutsкая, leader of a project on HIV/AIDS prevention, put the number of persons engaged in prostitution in Minsk at 3,000. Between January and November, 431 persons received administrative penalties for engaging in prostitution. This was a 30 percent increase compared to the same period in 2008.

Sexual harassment reportedly was widespread, but no specific laws, other than those against physical assault, address the problem.

Couples and individuals had the right to decide the number, spacing, and timing of children, and had the information and means to do so free from discrimination. Access to information on contraception and skilled attendance at delivery and in postpartum care were widely available. Women and men were given equal access to diagnostic services and treatment for sexually transmitted infections.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security is responsible for ensuring gender equality, although it cannot issue binding instructions to other government agencies. The law provides for equal treatment of women with regards to property ownership and inheritance, family law, and the judicial system, and it was generally respected in practice. The law also requires equal wages for equal work, although this provision was not always enforced. There were very few women in the upper ranks of management or government.

The National Statistics Committee reported that as of December 31, 57.1 percent of the unemployed were women. The law grants women the right to three years of maternity leave with assurance of job availability upon return. However, employers circumvented employment protections by using short-term contracts, then refusing to renew a woman's contract when she becomes pregnant. During an inspection of 29 enterprises in the Vitsyebsk region, the local prosecutor's office found that employed women who were taking care of minor children were at times forced to travel on business and to work overnight and overtime without their prior consent and in violation of laws. A number of women worked in extreme and hazardous conditions.

Children

Citizenship is derived either by birth within the country's territory or from one's parents. A child of a Belarusian citizen is a Belarusian citizen regardless of place of birth, even if the other parent is not a citizen.

Romani children were subject to harassment from non-Romani children and teachers. The majority of Romani youth did not finish secondary school. There was no public school for Roma, although there were school programs for Jews, ethnic Lithuanians, and Poles.

Reports of child abuse were infrequent. Between January and September, authorities removed 457 children from homes with neglectful parents and placed them in the care of child welfare authorities.

An education ministry representative stated on November 19 that the number of child pornography, child prostitution, and child trafficking cases remained small. However, there were reports that the number of child pornography cases was on the rise and children were trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation and, in one case, labor. As of October 1, the Interior Ministry registered 11 child pornography cases. The law provides penalties of up to 13 years in jail for production or distribution of pornographic materials depicting a minor.

Rape or sexual assault of a person known to be a minor is punishable by up to 15 years in jail. Sexual acts between a person over 18 years of age and a person known to be under 16 carry penalties of up to five years in jail.

There were some reports of child marriage within the Romani community, where girls as young as 14 and boys as young as 16 frequently were married with parental consent.

Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits all forms of trafficking in persons; however, trafficking remained a serious problem, and the country continued to be both a source and transit country for trafficked persons.

From January through September, the Ministry of Internal Affairs registered 321 trafficking-related crimes, including 94 cases of trafficking. Over the same time period, the ministry also reported 232 victims who were trafficked abroad. The majority were sexually exploited.

Women were primarily trafficked to Russia, the European Union (particularly Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Lithuania, Austria, and the Netherlands), the Middle East (particularly Israel, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates), and Turkey. Trafficking to Russia presented a particular problem, both because of an open border between the countries and because authorities tended to downplay problems with Russia due to political considerations. Most female victims of trafficking were seeking a way to escape bad economic circumstances or situations involving domestic abuse. Local NGOs asserted that more government intervention to reduce domestic violence and alcoholism would greatly reduce the number of women seeking employment abroad.

Reports by the Ministry of Internal Affairs indicated that traffickers were usually members of loosely organized criminal networks with connections to larger international organized crime rings, brothels, clubs, or bars in destination countries.

Traffickers lured victims through advertisements, via modeling and employment agencies, and by personal approaches through friends and relatives to offer jobs abroad or solicit marriage partners. Traffickers often withheld victims' documents and used physical and emotional abuse, fraud, and coercion to control them.

The law criminalizes trafficking for sexual or other exploitation. The property of convicted traffickers may be confiscated. The penalty for trafficking is a minimum of five years' imprisonment with property forfeiture, while the punishment for severe forms of trafficking is a minimum of 15 years' imprisonment.

Presidential decrees have eliminated criminal responsibility for illegal acts committed by victims, defined the status of victims, and mandated measures to provide protection, medical care, and social rehabilitation, but only on the condition that victims cooperated in an investigation and prosecution. Reports indicated antitrafficking agencies often pressured victims to cooperate in investigations.

The government's antitrafficking efforts were coordinated by the Internal Affairs Ministry's department on Combating Trafficking in Human Persons. However, NGOs were more active in the areas of prevention and rehabilitation. Government sources stated that victims were more likely to trust assistance from NGOs than from government agencies. Antitrafficking NGOs and international organizations complained that the government provided insufficient and mostly in-kind assistance and failed to provide mandatory funding for victim assistance. NGOs actively participated in training government workers in rehabilitation but were dissatisfied with implementation by regional authorities.

During the year there were no investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of officials complicit in human trafficking. There were no reports of government complicity in trafficking, although such information may have been limited because of lack of press freedom and imprisonment of citizens for criticizing government officials. There were, however, continued reports that law enforcement and border officials often accepted bribes to facilitate border crossings without thorough scrutiny of identity documents. Such actions could have facilitated trafficking. There was no indication that the government systematically facilitated or condoned trafficking. The State Control Committee was responsible for investigating

allegations of official trafficking-related corruption through the Interagency Commission for Combating Crime, Corruption, and Drug Trafficking.

Victims seldom reported trafficking crimes to police due to social stigma, aversion to dealing with authorities, and a shortage of social services and rehabilitation options. The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection maintained 156 social service centers that could in theory help trafficking victims, but only 20 had specialized trafficking-related services and "crisis" facilities. Officials referred child victims of trafficking to one of the 146 government social care and education centers under the Education Ministry. To supplement government shelters, the UN Development Program, the International Organization for Migration, and La Strada also opened rehabilitation shelters for victims and their families. More than 30 NGOs nationwide provided services to trafficking victims. La Strada provided training to many regional victim support centers but expressed dissatisfaction with the follow-up, citing several cases where regional officers displayed skepticism or insensitivity towards victims.

La Strada and the Young Women's Christian Association maintained a women's hotline that provided advice regarding offers of employment or marriage that might be trafficking-related. Since 2001 the hotline received over 15,000 calls and 550 emails. During the year the hotline received 770 calls and more than 100 emails.

The government continued to distribute information through state institutions, show antitrafficking commercials on state television, place materials at local and foreign diplomatic posts, and organize roundtables and seminars for NGOs and government officials.

To deter trafficking, the government required Internet dating services to reregister and provide information about citizens and foreigners planning to meet in person. Authorities continued to enforce strong measures to discourage and control freedom of movement, which they justified in part as antitrafficking measures.

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

Persons with Disabilities

The law does not specifically prohibit discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment, education, access to health care, and other government services, and such discrimination was common in practice.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security is the main government agency responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. The law mandates that transport, residences, and businesses be accessible to persons with disabilities. However, in practice few public areas were wheelchair accessible. The Republican Association of Disabled Wheelchair Users estimated that more than 75 percent of persons with disabilities were unable to leave their own homes without assistance.

Authorities provided minimal, reportedly ineffectual, benefits for persons with disabilities. For example, persons with disabilities who lived alone were entitled to a 50 percent discount on rent and utilities. Since few residences were accessible, persons with disabilities had to live with friends or family and thus were ineligible for the discount. Public transportation was free to persons with disabilities, but neither the subway in Minsk nor the bus system was wheelchair accessible. A government prohibition against workdays longer than seven hours for persons with disabilities made companies reluctant to hire them.

On May 29, a court in Minsk rejected a lawsuit from a wheelchair user seeking damages for his inability to enter the Ballet and Opera Houses on March 12. The individual's wheelchair was too wide to fit through the main entrance of the building, and security guards refused to allow him to enter through a side entrance reserved for employees.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Governmental and societal discrimination against the ethnic Polish population and Roma persisted. There were also expressions of societal hostility toward proponents of Belarusian national culture.

Authorities continued to harass the unrecognized Union of Poles, its chairperson Anzhelika Borys, and her associates.

On January 31, authorities deported two Polish language and history teachers at a school in Brest. They were members of the Union of Poles and residents of Poland.

On February 19, police warned Teresa Selivonchyk, chairwoman of the Union of Poles office in Baranavichy, to stop acting on behalf of the unregistered organization.

In March police in Hrodna refused to open a criminal investigation into incidents of harassment against Andrzej Paczobut and his family. Criminals damaged the entrance doors to his apartment and made phone calls to threaten his daughter with physical abuse. Also in early March, the Foreign Ministry cancelled Paczobut's foreign media accreditation for allegedly "biased" coverage of events in the country and "slandering the president."

On June 23, police detained four Union of Poles members for three hours and confiscated their printed materials in Shchuchyn.

On October 12, officials in Ivyanets made an inventory of the property at the Polish community center after they had allegedly received an anonymous report about the community's financial fraud.

Official and societal discrimination continued against the country's 40,000 to 60,000 Roma. The Romani community continued to experience high unemployment and low levels of education. In 2005 authorities estimated the unemployment rate among Roma at 80 percent. Roma were often denied access to higher education in state-run universities.

On December 3, however, OPRRNA stated that the country's Romani community had no problems that would require the government's "attention." Officials also claimed that the rate of unemployment among Roma was decreasing and school attending rates were improving.

The Russian and Belarusian languages have equal legal status; however, in practice Russian was the primary language used by the government. In 2007 the Constitutional Court's chief justice acknowledged that discrimination against the Belarusian language was "not rare" but maintained that such discrimination was usually corrected.

Because the government viewed proponents of the Belarusian language as political opponents of the regime, authorities continued to harass and intimidate academic and cultural groups seeking to promote use of the Belarusian language. Authorities made concessions to Belarusian language usage, such as changing street signs to Belarusian and airing more news shows in Belarusian, but proposals to widen the language's usage were routinely rejected.

Societal Abuses, Discrimination, and Acts of Violence Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Homosexuality is not illegal, but discrimination against members of the LGBT community was widespread, and harassment occurred. According to a local LGBT rights group, government-controlled media discouraged participation in the protests following the 2006 presidential election by saying they were part of a "gay revolution."

In February Homyel authorities denied local gay activists permission to hold a "Right to Love" event on February 12 in which they planned to distribute educational materials and raise public awareness about homophobia and discrimination against homosexuals. A similar request submitted to the Minsk authorities was also denied.

On July 22, Syarhei Androsenka, the head of the GayBelarus project, announced that Belarus customs officials had seized 25 copies of a gay interest magazine that were mailed to him. Officials claimed that they seized the publication because it was not registered in the country.

In the early morning of August 24, following a dispute at a bar, unknown persons followed and assaulted gay rights activist Maksim Tsarkou. During the assault the assailants cursed at the victim and shouted homophobic slurs.

On September 23, the KGB in Homyel informed local gay rights activist Svyataslau Semyantsou that they had opened a criminal case against him for participating in activities of an unregistered group. The KGB also threatened Semyantsou with charges of providing defamatory and discrediting information to a foreign source.

On December 17, a court in Minsk fined LGBT community activist Alyksandr Gagaryn BYR 105,000 (\$35) for participating in an unsanctioned picket in front of the Iranian embassy. The activists demonstrated to protest the capital punishment against LGBT persons in Iran. Police fined Syarhei Androsenka BYR 875,000 (\$300) and Syarhei Pradzed BYR 350,000(\$120) on December 23 for their participation in the same protest.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Societal discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS remained a problem and the illness carried a heavy stigma despite greater awareness and increased tolerance towards persons infected with the virus. For example, maternity wards no longer had separate facilities for HIV-infected mothers. However, the UN AIDS office reported that there were still numerous reports of HIV-infected individuals who faced discrimination. In December the government reported that 10,590 persons were infected with HIV.

In November the Belarusian Community of People Living with HIV noted that it had received approximately 15 complaints from HIV-positive residents of Svetlahorsk who said that teachers at schools attended by their children had been informed of their HIV status. According to the association, local authorities collected the information from the local drug addiction hospital and shared it with the schools, in response to a presidential decree that requires authorities to monitor families in which parents are drug users. The association expressed concern that the disclosure of confidential medical information could lead to discrimination against children of HIV-positive individuals.

Section 7 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law allows workers, except state security and military personnel, to form and join independent unions; however, in practice the government did not respect this right. During the year the government continued efforts to suppress independent unions, stop union activities, and bring all union activity under its control. Its efforts included frequent refusals to extend employment contracts for members of independent unions and refusals to register some unions.

According to Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BCDTU) leader Alyksandr Yarashuk, no independent unions have been established since President Lukashenka's 1999 decree requiring trade unions to register with the government.

The law provides for the right to strike; however, tight government control over public demonstrations made it difficult for unions to do so. Management and local authorities also blocked worker attempts to organize strikes on many occasions by declaring them illegal.

The government-controlled Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTUB) was the largest union, claiming an estimated four million members; however, that number was likely inflated, since the country's total workforce was approximately four

million. The BCDTU, with three constituent unions and approximately seven thousand members, was the largest independent union. Approximately 9,500 persons were members of independent trade unions.

On December 9, Leanid Kozik, FTUB chairman, asserted that "provocations" and "demands" by trade unions not affiliated with the FTUB should be ignored.

Local authorities continued to deny registration to the Vitsyebsk, Mahilyou, and Homyel chapters of the Belarusian Union of Electronic Industry Workers (REP). According to the REP, authorities refused to reregister the chapter in Mahilyou because the REP office landlord had not agreed to register the office as its legal address due to harassment from officials. On April 22, a court in Mahilyou upheld the registration denial.

The REP reported on January 7 that the Rechytsa city authorities registered their office despite two earlier registration denials and an unsuccessful court appeal to challenge them.

The government prevented the REP from staging multiple protests across Belarus on April 3. The REP had intended to disseminate information about violations of trade union rights.

The government combined administrative measures and a system of contracts with individual workers, mostly from one to five years in length, to discourage membership in independent unions and in regional, national, and international labor organizations.

On January 16, a court in Babruisk sentenced local factory worker and free trade union member Vasil Kurlyandchik to 18 months of community service for allegedly beating a factory manager in August 2008. Kurlyandchik claimed that he suffered head and brain injuries in the incident and was hospitalized for two weeks. He suggested that the charges stemmed from his multiple complaints to the management about the illegal deductions from his salary for purportedly flawed products.

On October 12, a court in Babruisk upheld two reprimands that were issued to Mikhal Ustsinovich, leader of a 20-member independent trade union at the Belshyna tire factory. Ustsinovich was accused of allegedly violating the factory's labor regulations. Ustsinovich could be dismissed after a third disciplinary action.

In January the Ministry of Justice denied registration to Razam, a trade union of small- and medium-sized businesses, citing absence of the minutes of the union's founding convention, failure to cover registration fees, and insufficient documentation. Razam's leader, Mikalai Kanakh, said that the registration process was "excessively complicated" and insisted that his group had filed correct applications with the ministry.

The government also targeted union leaders and activists. During the year more than 30 REP members were forced to quit their membership in the union following threats of dismissal.

Workers who were deemed "natural leaders" or who involved themselves in NGOs or opposition political activities were routinely fired for these activities. For example, in October Mahilyou-based Belarusian Social Democratic Party Hramada leader Ihar Barysau was dismissed from his job for allegedly failing to comply with professional duties. In 2006 Barysau also lost his job due to his political activities.

Pursuant to a December 18 court order, management of a hydropower station in Lukoml reinstated Alyaksey Gabryel, the leader of a local independent trade union. Gabryel's labor contract was not extended in October, and it was widely believed that he was dismissed for his union activities.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law provides for the right to organize and bargain collectively; however, government authorities and managers of state-owned enterprises routinely interfered with union activities and hindered workers' efforts to bargain collectively, in some instances arbitrarily suspending collective bargaining agreements.

On July 30, the FTUB issued recommendations for the employers to sign collective bargaining agreements only with the most represented trade unions irrespective of whether there were members of other trade unions among the personnel. BCDTU leader Yarashuk argued that such measure would violate the rights of trade unions.

Since 2004 the government has required state employees, who constitute approximately 80 percent of the working population, to sign short-term work contracts. Although such contracts may have terms of up to five years, most expired after one year, which gave the government the possibility of firing employees by simply declining to renew their contract. Many members of independent unions, political parties, and civil society groups lost their jobs because of this practice.

On August 11, Brest-based Riona Enterprise Management forced 11 of 12 REP members at the firm to withdraw from the union by threatening to withhold their salaries. The REP had sought to have their working conditions designated as hazardous so they could receive appropriate compensation.

During the year the Polatsk chapter of the BFTU continued to negotiate without success with the Polatsk Shklovalakno fiberglass manufacturer over the company's unwillingness to grant the BFTU the same privileges granted to its rival, the progovernment FTUB.

In contrast, the management of the Baran-based Lyos factory ceased putting pressure on Free Trade Union of Metal Workers members to leave that union and join the FTUB.

There are no special laws or exemptions from regular labor laws in the country's six free economic zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor; however, there were reports that women, men, and children were trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor.

During the year the government approved several "subbotniks," which required employees of government, state enterprises, and many private businesses to work on Saturday and donate earnings to finance government social projects. Workers who refused to take part were subject to fines and intimidation by employers and authorities.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law forbids the exploitation of children in the workplace, including a prohibition on forced and compulsory labor, and specifies policies for acceptable working conditions. The government generally implemented these laws in practice.

The minimum age for employment is 16; however, a child as young as 14 may conclude a labor contract with the written consent of one parent or legal guardian. The prosecutor general's office reportedly enforced the law effectively. Minors under 18 were allowed to work in nonhazardous jobs, but were not allowed to work overtime, on weekends, or on government holidays. Work was not to be harmful to the minors' health or hinder their education.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

On November 1, the national minimum monthly wage was BYR 220,080 (approximately \$102), which did not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. In November the average monthly wage was BYR 1,012,900 (\$355).

The law establishes a standard work week of 40 hours and provides for at least one 24-hour rest period per week. Because of the country's difficult economic situation, many workers worked considerably less than 40 hours per week, and factories often required workers to take unpaid furloughs due to lack of demand for the factory's products. The law provides for mandatory overtime and holiday pay and restricts overtime to four hours every two days, with a maximum of 120 hours of overtime each year. According to sources, the government was believed to effectively enforce these standards.

The law establishes minimum conditions for workplace safety and worker health; however, employers often ignored these standards. Workers at many heavy machinery plants did not wear minimal safety gear. There is a state labor inspectorate, but it lacked authority to enforce employer compliance and often ignored violations.

The Ministry of Labor reported that 83 workplace fatalities occurred and 338 employees suffered serious injuries in workplace incidents from January to June. The ministry reported that workplace accidents were caused by carelessness, poor conditions, malfunctioning equipment, and poor training and instruction. Worker intoxication was involved in 6 percent of workplace deaths and injuries. The law does not provide workers the right to remove themselves from dangerous and unhealthy work environments without risking loss of employment.