



Oman

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2004](#)

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

February 28, 2005

The Sultanate of Oman is a monarchy ruled by Sultan Qaboos Al Bu Sa'id, who acceded to the throne in 1970. In 1996, the Sultan issued a royal decree promulgating a Basic Law of the State, characterizing the country as "Arab" and "Islamic." The Basic Law provides that it can only be amended by Royal Decree. The country has no political parties; however, the Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura) is a representative advisory institution whose members are elected directly by voters. Unlike in previous years in which the Government selected voters, all adult citizens had the right to vote in the October 2003 Consultative Council elections. The elections were generally free and fair, and approximately 74 percent of registered voters (194,000) voted to elect the 83 members of the Consultative Council. The Sultan retained firm control over all important policy issues and had final authority over the election process. The Sultan also appointed 58 members to the State Council (Majlis al-Dawla), which, along with the Consultative Council, forms the bicameral body known as the Council of Oman (Majlis Oman). The Basic Law provides for many basic human rights, which are to be expressed "in accordance with this Basic Law and the conditions and circumstances defined in the law"; however, while not all legislation for implementation has been enacted, the responsibilities delineated in the Basic Law became effective in 1996 when it was enacted. In cases where there is no implementing legislation, judges render judgment according to the principles of the Basic Law. The Basic Law provides for an independent judiciary; however, it gives the Sultan the right to appoint and dismiss judges, as well as to overturn judicial decisions on appeal.

The Royal Office controls internal and external security and coordinates all intelligence and security policies. The Internal Security Service investigates all matters related to internal security. The Royal Oman Police (ROP), whose head also has cabinet status, performs regular police duties, provides security at airports, serves as the country's immigration agency, and maintains a small coast guard. The Government maintained effective control of the security forces. There were no reports that security forces committed human rights abuses.

The country had a population of approximately 2.3 million, including approximately 559,000 foreigners. Based on the 2003 national census, the rate of population growth was 1.9 percent. Oil revenues were used to improve public access to health care, education, and social services for citizens. The GDP economic growth rate was 5.9 percent and the economy was mixed, with significant government participation in industry, transportation, and communications.

Although the Government respected a number of rights, many serious human rights problems remained. Citizens did not have the right to change their government, which is a "hereditary Sultanate." Police did not always follow procedures regarding arrest and detention, and, in some instances, police handling of arrest and detention constituted incommunicado detention. The Government restricted freedoms of speech, the press, assembly, and religion. Despite legislated equality, discrimination against women remained a problem due to social and cultural factors. At times, foreign workers in private firms were placed in situations amounting to forced labor, and abuse of foreign domestic servants was a problem. Workers rights were restricted.

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 of the arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life committed by the Government or its agents.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

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

The Basic Law prohibits such practices, and stipulates that all confessions obtained by such methods are to be considered null and void. There were no reported cases of voided confessions during the year.

Judges have the right to order investigations of allegations of mistreatment. There were no reports of such investigations during the year.

Prison conditions did not appear to meet international standards, and no visits by international human rights observers were requested. Prisoners have reported not having beds, and sleeping on the floor in crowded cells. While prisoners were fed regularly, they did not appear nutritionally sound. There were separate facilities for men and women, as well as separate facilities for juveniles and adults. Based on limited information, conditions for women did not appear to vary from those of men. Security prisoners were held separately and their conditions did not appear to vary from those of regular prisoners. Pretrial detainees also were held separately.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention; however, there were problems in some areas.

The ROP broadly serves the country's security needs by encompassing such ancillary duties as customs, airport security, civil defense, and coast guard. Corruption was not perceived to be a widespread problem, and there were no instances in which the police failed to respond to societal violence.

The police are not required to obtain warrants prior to making an arrest. There were no reports of arbitrary detention. Within 48 hours of arrest, the police must either release the accused subject or refer the matter to the Public Prosecutor. The Prosecutor must then, within 24 hours, either formally arrest or release the subject. Authorities must obtain court orders to hold suspects in pretrial detention. Judges may order detentions for 14 days to allow investigation and may grant extensions if necessary. The authorities post the previous week's trial results near the magistrate court building. There was a functioning system of bail.

In practice, the police did not always follow legal procedures. Police handling of arrests and detentions constituted incommunicado detention in some instances. The police did not always notify a detainee's family or, in the case of a foreign worker, the worker's sponsor, of the detention. At times, notification was made just prior to the detainee's release. The police did not always permit attorneys and family members to visit detainees. Judges occasionally interceded to ensure that security officials allowed such visits.

There were no reports of political detainees.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Basic Law provides for an independent judiciary; however, the various courts were subordinate to the Sultan. The Sultan appoints all judges, who serve at his discretion through royal decree. The Sultan can act as a court of final appeal and intercede in cases, such as those concerning national security. However, there were no reported instances in which the Sultan overturned a decision of the magistrate courts.

The court system is composed of the Supreme Court, an appeals court, primary courts (one located in each region), and, within the primary courts, divisional courts. Within each of the courts, there are divisions to consider commercial, civil, penal, labor, taxation, general, and personal status cases, such as divorce and inheritance (the latter under Shari'a law). The General Prosecutor's Office operates independently within the Ministry of Justice. An Administrative Court under the authority of the Diwan, or Royal Court reviews complaints against the misuse of governmental authority. During the year, the Administrative Court ruled against the Government in several cases brought by private parties, and increasingly was used as a check against governmental violations of the law. For example, in December, a landowner successfully sued the municipality for annexing part of his property.

The law provides for a fair trial, and the judiciary generally enforced this right. The Ministry of Justice administers all courts. All felonies are adjudicated at the Central Magistrate Court by a panel whose rulings are final, except for those in which the defendant is sentenced to death.

The Criminal Appeals Panel is composed of the President of the Magistrate Court, the court's vice president, and two judges. This panel hears appeals of rulings made by all courts of first instance. In the past, officers from the ROP received special training to carry out the role of public prosecutors in criminal cases; however, prosecutors now operate independently of the ROP.

A royal decree established criminal rules of procedure for criminal cases before the courts, providing rules of evidence, procedures for entering cases into the criminal system, and detailing provisions for a public trial. In criminal cases, the police provide defendants with the written charges against them, and defendants have the right to present evidence and confront witnesses. The prosecution and the defense direct questions to witnesses through the judge, who is usually the only person to question witnesses in court. The Basic Law provides for the presumption of innocence and the right to counsel. For defendants

facing prison terms of 3 years or more, the law provides legal defense. Judges often pronounced the verdict and sentence within 1 day of the completion of a trial. Those convicted may appeal jail sentences longer than 3 months and fines over the equivalent of \$1,250 (480 rials) to a three-judge panel.

The State Security Court tries cases involving national security and criminal matters that require expeditious or especially sensitive handling. While an institution such as the Security Court functioned on an ad hoc basis in the past, two royal decrees in 2003 gave legal basis to the court. The Security Court procedures mirror closely those applicable elsewhere in the criminal system. The Sultan has exercised his powers of extending leniency, including in cases involving state security.

The Ministry of Justice administers Shari'a courts of the first instance and an appeals court, and applies Shari'a law in the most broadly accepted interpretation. Courts of first instance, with a single presiding judge, are located in each of the 59 wilayats, or governorates. The Court of Appeals rulings themselves may be appealed, within a 1-month period, to the Supreme Committee for Complaints, which is composed of four members, including the Minister of Justice and the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate. Shari'a courts handle all family law cases.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

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

The law provides flexibility in this area, which the Government utilized in practice.

Although it is not required by law, the police reportedly do obtain search warrants; however, the public prosecutor, not the court, issues them. There was a widely held view that the Government eavesdropped on both oral and written communications. Citizens were required to obtain permission from the Ministry of Interior to marry foreigners, except nationals of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and permission was not granted automatically. Delays or denial of permission resulted in secret marriages within the country. Marriage in a foreign country may lead to denial of entry of the foreign spouse into the country, and prevent a legitimate child from claiming citizenship rights.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Basic Law provides for freedom of speech and of the press "within the limits of the Law"; however, the law and government practice generally restricted freedom of speech and of the press. The law prohibits criticism of the Sultan in any form or medium and prohibits the publishing of "material that leads to public discord, violates the security of the State, or abuses a person's dignity or his rights." Journalists and writers generally exercised self-censorship due to fear of government reprisal. The authorities tolerated some criticism of government officials and agencies, particularly on the Internet; however, such criticism rarely appeared in the mass media. For example, the Internet chatroom, Al-Sablah, occasionally contained messages criticizing the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Social Development.

Censors enforced the Press and Publication Law, which authorizes the Government to censor all domestic and imported publications. Ministry of Information censors may act against any material regarded as politically, culturally, or sexually offensive. Editorials generally were consistent with the Government's views, although the authorities tolerated some criticism regarding foreign affairs issues. Citizens were publicly critical of GCC policies, which the country participates in determining. The Government discouraged in-depth reporting on controversial domestic issues and sought to influence privately owned dailies and periodicals by subsidizing their operating costs. There were five daily newspapers, three in Arabic and two in English. Arabic language dailies "Al-Watan" and "Shabiba" as well as the English daily "Times of Oman" were privately owned. There were 32 state-owned and privately owned magazines published in the country.

In October 2003, journalists announced the creation of the Gulf Press Freedom Center (GPFC), which attempts to promote and defend a free press and human rights and aid journalistic professional development in the Gulf region. The GPFC is not an authorized organization in the country, but rather an informal network of concerned journalists in the Arab world. The GPFC had little effect on promoting free press in the region; however, its founder continued to monitor alleged abuses of freedom of the press, and bring such cases (Abdullah al-Riyami and Mohamed al-Harhi) to the media's attention. There were reports that various media houses refused to publish articles of these journalists for unknown reasons.

Customs officials confiscated videocassette tapes and erased offensive material, despite the lack of published guidelines regarding what was considered offensive. Such tapes may or may not have been returned to their owners. Government censorship decisions were changed periodically without any stated reason. During the year, the confiscation of books and tapes at the borders from private individuals and restrictions on popular novels reportedly eased somewhat.

The Government owned four radio stations and two television stations, which generally did not air politically controversial material. In August, the Government promulgated a new law allowing private radio and television companies. No companies have been created since the initial decree. Foreign broadcast information is accessible to those with the financial resources to obtain satellite dishes.

The appropriate government authority, the police, or a relevant ministry must approve public cultural events. Most organizations avoided controversial issues due to belief that the authorities might not approve their events.

The Government, through its national telecommunications company, made Internet access available, for a fee, to citizens and foreign residents. However, it blocked certain websites that it considered pornographic or politically sensitive. As use of the Internet for expressing views normally not permitted in other media grew, the Government took additional measures to monitor and censor it. The Government placed warnings on websites that criticism of the Sultan, or personal criticism of government officials, would be censored and could lead to police questioning, which increased self-censorship.

The Government restricted academic freedom, particularly regarding publication or discussion of controversial matters, such as domestic politics. Professors could be dismissed if their work exceeded government boundaries; however, there were no reports of such dismissals during the year.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Basic Law provides for a circumscribed freedom of assembly "within the limits of the Law," and the Government restricted it in practice. There must be prior government approval for all public gatherings. The authorities, with rare exceptions such as demonstrations by teachers protesting the lack of promotions and expatriate workers protesting nonpayment of back wages, enforced this requirement.

The Basic Law provides for freedom of association "for legitimate objectives and in a proper manner." In practice, the Government limited this freedom by the ability to prohibit associations whose activities are "inimical to the social order." The law states that the Ministry of Social Development must approve the establishment of all organizations and their by-laws; however, some purely social or social welfare groups were allowed to function without formal registration. The Government used licensing to control the political environment; it did not license groups regarded as a threat to the predominant social and political views or the interests of the country. Formal registration of associations of expatriates was limited to a maximum of one association per nationality.

Several leaders of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) received aggressively worded letters from the Government threatening sanctions, unless their organizations completed a complicated and time-consuming registration process. There were 13 NGOs registered. The average time required to register an NGO was at least 2 years.

The Basic Law provides for the formation of associations providing services to women, children, and the elderly. There were 42 government-approved women's associations, some of which received limited government funding or in-kind support, while others were self-funded.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Basic Law provides for freedom of religion; however the Government restricted religious freedom. The Basic Law provides that Islam is the state religion and that Shari'a is the source of all legislation. Most citizens are Ibadhi or Sunni Muslims, while a minority are Shi'a. The Government permits worship by non-Muslim residents; however, non-Muslim religious organizations must be registered with the Government, and some of their activities are restricted. They may not proselytize Muslims, or publish religious material in the country.

The Basic Law prohibits discrimination against citizens on the basis of religion or religious group. In the first quarter of 2003, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments launched a new quarterly periodical entitled "Tolerance." The magazine aims to highlight the tolerant aspects of Islam.

Non-Muslims were free to worship at churches and temples built on land donated by the Sultan. The Government prohibited non-Muslims from proselytizing, although proselytizing of non-Muslims by Muslims was allowed. It also prohibited non-Muslim groups from publishing religious material, although religious material printed abroad could be brought into the country.

Certain medical and educational activities by missionaries were permitted, as long as missionaries did not proselytize. Members of all religions and religious groups were free to maintain links with members abroad, and undertake foreign travel for religious purposes.

The Government required all imams to preach sermons within the parameters of standardized texts distributed monthly by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments. The Government monitored mosque sermons to ensure that imams did not discuss political topics, instigate religious hatred or divisions, and stayed within the state-approved orthodoxy of Islam. The Government also monitored sermons of non-Muslim clergy. There were reports of imams being suspended or dismissed for exceeding government boundaries.

For a more detailed discussion, see the [2004 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

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

The law does not provide for these rights; however, the Government generally respected these rights in practice. The Government did not restrict travel by citizens within the country except to military areas. The Basic Law prohibits exile, and there were no reported cases during the year.

The Basic Law prohibits the extradition of political refugees, and there were no reports of the forced return of persons to a country where they feared persecution. The issue of the provision of temporary protection for refugees and asylum-seekers did not arise during the year. Tight control over the entry of foreigners into the country effectively limited refugees and prospective asylum-seekers from entering. Illegal immigrants numbering in the thousands, primarily from Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, are apprehended annually by the ROP and the armed forces. The detainees are held in special detention centers until their deportation can be arranged. The Government seeks advice from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The law provides for the granting of refugee status or asylum in accordance with the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, although the country is not a state party to either the convention or the protocol. In practice, the Government provided protection against refoulement, the return of persons to a country where they feared persecution, but did not routinely grant refugee or asylum status.

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

The law does not provide citizens with the right to change their government. The Sultan retains ultimate authority on all foreign and domestic issues.

The country's Basic Law provides for many basic human rights. Although it is considered to have had immediate force of law when promulgated in 1996, legislation and regulations to implement a number of its provisions have not been enacted. While family, judicial, administrative, and financial legislation has been enacted, much of it lacks the clarity of more developed legal systems. In cases where there is no implementing legislation, judges render judgment according to the principles of the Basic Law.

The law does not provide for political parties or direct elections, except to the Consultative Council. Citizens had indirect access to senior officials through the traditional practice of petitioning their patrons, usually the appointed local governor, for redress of grievances. Successful redress depended on the effectiveness of a patron's access to appropriate decision makers. Decisions of government ministers can be contested in the Administrative Court. The Consultative Council had the prerogative to invite certain government ministers for questioning, which it exercised during the year when the Minister of Commerce and Industry was called to testify regarding the high cost of building material.

Citizens 21 years or older (except military and security personnel) may vote. In 2003, over 800,000 citizens were eligible to register to vote and approximately 226,000 did so. 74 percent of registered voters, or roughly 194,000 persons, actually voted. A total of 506 candidates, including 15 women, competed in generally free and fair elections for the 83 Consultative Council seats. Of the 15 female candidates competing, 2 were elected. In October 2003, a royal decree also reappointed the incumbent President of the Consultative Council, although the Council elected two vice-presidents from within its membership. The Sultan did not influence the nomination of the Consultative Council candidates.

The Consultative Council serves as a conduit of information between the citizens and the government ministries; however it has no formal legislative powers. Government ministries author nearly all draft legislation. No serving government official was eligible to be a Consultative Council member. The Consultative Council may question government ministers in public or in private, review all draft laws on social and economic policy, and recommend new laws or legislative changes to the Sultan, who makes the final decision. During the year, the membership of the State Council increased from 53 to 58 members, and included 9 women. The precise responsibilities of the State Council and its relationship to the existing Consultative Council have yet to be clarified. The State Council and the Consultative Council together form the Majlis Oman, or Council of Oman. In October 2003, a royal decree extended the term of office for members of the Council to 4 years.

Between March 2003 and year's end, the first 4 female ministers were appointed to the 42 member Cabinet. Women hold the ministerial posts at the Public Authority for Craft Industries, the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Higher Education, and the Ministry of Tourism. There was one female undersecretary and one female ambassador. There were 2 female members of the Consultative Council, and 3 women served on its 12-member Main Election Committee.

Some Shi'a occupied prominent positions in both the private and public sectors. For example, the Ministers of National Economy (also de facto Minister of Finance), Commerce and Industry, and Health are Shi'a.

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

There were no registered domestic human rights NGOs, and no government-controlled or autonomous human rights entities in the country.

In June, a representative of the NGO Freedom House visited the country, and, in August, a two-person delegation from Amnesty International (AI) visited the country. However, the Government stated AI did not give officials ample time to prepare an appropriate program for the AI visit.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking In Persons

The Basic Law prohibits discrimination against citizens on the basis of sex, ethnic origin, race, language, religion, place of residence, and social class; however, the Government did not effectively enforce these provisions. Societal and cultural discrimination based on gender, race, social class, and disability existed.

Women

The law does not specifically address domestic violence against women; however, Shari'a prohibits all forms of physical abuse. There was no evidence of a pattern of spousal abuse, although observers claimed that allegations of such abuse in the Shari'a courts were common, and conversations with local observers indicated that domestic violence was a real concern. Battered women may file a complaint with the police, but often sought family intervention to protect them from violent domestic situations. Likewise, families sought to intervene to keep such problems from public view. There were reports of employers sexually abusing domestic servants, and co-workers physically harassing hospital nurses without being held accountable for such actions (see Section 6.e.). There were no government programs for abused women. The law prohibits rape, and the Government enforced the law effectively.

Prostitution was illegal, and generally was rare due to strict cultural norms and immigration controls.

There is no law prohibiting female genital mutilation (FGM); however, experts believed that the number of such cases was small and declining.

While progress has been made in changing laws and attitudes, women continued to face many forms of social discrimination.

Illiteracy among older women hampered their ability to own property, participate in the modern sector of the economy, or inform themselves of their rights. Women may own property; however, government officials frequently denied women land grants or housing loans and preferred to conduct business with a woman's husband or other male relative.

Some aspects of Islamic law and tradition as interpreted in the country also discriminated against women. Shari'a favors male heirs in adjudicating inheritance claims. Many women were reluctant to take an inheritance dispute to court for fear of alienating the family. Women married to noncitizens may not transmit citizenship to their children.

Women have equal opportunities for education. The ratio of female to male enrollment was equal in primary education. A 2003 UNICEF report praised the country's achievements in closing the gender gap in education. In addition, female students represent 63 percent of the national undergraduates studying abroad. Educated women have attained positions of authority in government, business, and the media. Approximately 33 percent of all civil servants were women. In both the public and private sectors, women were entitled to maternity leave and equal pay for equal work. The Government, the country's largest employer of women, observed such regulations, as did many private sector employers. However, many educated women still faced job discrimination. The Ministry of Social Development is the umbrella ministry for women's affairs. The Ministry provided support through the Oman Women's Association and local community development centers.

Children

The Government has made the education, health, and general welfare of children a budgetary priority. Primary school education for children, including noncitizen children, was free and universal, but not compulsory. Primary school enrollment was 65 percent. Most children attended school through secondary school. The infant mortality rate continued to decline, and comprehensive immunization rates rose. The Government provided free health care for all children up to 6 years of age. There were no public reports of violence against children; however, the Government has called publicly for greater awareness and prevention of child abuse. FGM was not common (see Section 5, Women).

The Government formed a National Committee on the Rights of the Child (NCRC) to monitor the country's compliance with the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. In April, a royal decree ratified two optional protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child: The Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography, and The Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.

There were no reports of child prostitution. Child labor existed in the informal, subsistence, and family business sectors of the economy; however, it was not a problem in the organized labor market (see Section 6.d.).

Trafficking in Persons

The law does not prohibit trafficking in persons; however there were no reports that persons were trafficked to, from, or within the country.

Persons with Disabilities

There was no government discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment, education, access to health care, or in the provision of other state services.

There is no legislated or otherwise mandated provision requiring access to public buildings for persons with disabilities; however, the Government has encouraged, with modest success, public facility accommodation of persons with disabilities. The Labor Law stipulates that enterprises employing more than 50 persons should have at least 2 percent of the jobs earmarked for persons with disabilities; however, this regulation was not widely enforced. There was a government-sponsored rehabilitation center in the capital, and there were 17 private rehabilitation centers throughout the country. A few persons with disabilities, including blind persons, worked in government offices. Persons with disabilities generally were not charged for physical therapy and prosthetics.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The Basic Law prohibits discrimination against citizens based on racial or ethnic characteristics. Citizens of African origin sometimes claimed that they faced job discrimination in both the public and private sectors, although these allegations have diminished over several years.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

While there were no reports of official discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS, societal attitude in the country remained fearful towards persons with the disease. A "Peer Education" pilot project promoted by the Ministry of Health and initiated in the Muscat area attempted to improve awareness and education on the disease among youth. In December 2003, a toll-free AIDS hotline was inaugurated, and was fielding 50 to 100 calls per month.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law does not provide workers with the right to form or join unions; however, workers in any establishment may form a representational committee with the goal of taking care of their interests, defending their rights, and representing them in all matters related to their affairs. Fifteen companies have held elections to their representational committees, and 7 have been certified by the Ministry of Manpower.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The Labor Law does not address strikes; however, the labor law details procedures for dispute resolution. Labor unrest was rare. Strikes are permitted; however, there were none during the year.

The law does not explicitly provide for the right to collective bargaining. The law requires that employers of more than 50 workers form a joint labor-management committee as a communication forum between the groups. Implementation of this provision was uneven, and the effectiveness of the committees was questionable. Membership in the administrative body is terminated if members "commit any act that causes material or moral harm to the committee or the establishment or its workers or the public interest of the Sultanate." In addition, committees are prohibited from accepting grants from noncitizens and from traveling outside the country without approval from the ministry.

New rules relating to domestic employees were stipulated in Ministerial Decision 189. According to the new decision, the employee has the right to end a contract if he or she proves that the employer or a family member assaulted him or her. It also stipulates that employees should be paid within 7 days of the end of each month, and should receive free food, accommodation, and medical treatment. Employees have the right to take disputes to the Labor Welfare Board. The Labor Welfare Board attempts to mediate disputes between employers and employees. If a settlement cannot be reached, the parties may seek recourse in the appropriate courts.

Work rules must be approved by the Ministry of Manpower and posted conspicuously in the workplace by employers of 15 or more workers. Government inspectors occasionally performed random inspections to enforce implementation of these regulations. Similarly, any employer with 50 or more workers must establish a grievance procedure. Employees, including foreign workers, may file a grievance with the Labor Welfare Board, which functions as a mediator between employee and employer. In some cases, worker representatives were able to file collective grievances. Should mediation fail, cases may be referred to court; however, this occurred infrequently. Lower-paid workers used the procedure regularly. Legal counsel may represent plaintiffs and defendants in such cases. Workers frequently took their cases to the courts, but since many of the companies that had not paid wages were bankrupt, it was difficult to collect judgments.

There were no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, including of children; however, there were reports that such practices occurred. The Government did not investigate or enforce the law effectively. Foreign workers at times were placed in situations amounting to forced labor. Employers have withheld documents that release workers from employment contracts and allow them to change employers. Without such a letter, a foreign worker must continue to work for his current employer or become technically unemployed, which was sufficient grounds for deportation. Many foreign workers were not aware of their right to take such disputes before the Labor Welfare Board. Others were reluctant to file complaints for fear of retribution from unscrupulous employers. In most cases, the board released the worker from service without deportation and awarded compensation for time worked under compulsion. In addition to reimbursing the worker's back wages, guilty employers were subject to fines.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law specifically prohibits forced or compulsory labor by children, and there were no reports that such practices occurred.

In April 2003, the Government raised the minimum age for children to work from 13 to 15 years. For certain hazardous occupations, the minimum employment age is 18 years. Children 15 to 18 years of age may be employed, but they cannot work at night, on weekends, or holidays. The Ministry of Manpower generally enforced the law; however, in practice, enforcement often did not extend to some small family businesses that employ underage children, particularly in the agricultural and fishing sectors.

Child labor did not exist in any formal industry. Although some children participated in camel races, there were no reports of child camel jockey abuses. In rare instances where children who normally raced camels free of charge were paid, it was not illegal and did not constitute child labor. The NCRC recommended raising the minimum age of child camel jockeys from 12 to 15 years.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The Ministry of Manpower issues minimum wage guidelines for various categories of workers. The suggested minimum wage for most citizens is approximately \$260 (100 rials) per month, plus \$52 (20 rials) for transportation and housing. Minimum wage guidelines did not apply to a variety of occupations and businesses, including small businesses that employed fewer than five persons, the self-employed, domestic servants, dependent family members working for a family firm, and some categories of manual labor. Many foreigners worked in occupations that were exempt from the minimum wage guidelines; however, highly skilled foreign workers were well paid. The minimum wage was insufficient to provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family.

The private sector workweek was 40 to 45 hours; it included a rest period from Thursday afternoon through Friday. Government workers have a 35-hour workweek. While the law does not designate the number of days in a workweek, it requires at least one 24-hour rest period per week and mandates overtime pay for hours in excess of 48 per week. Government regulations regarding hours of employment were not always enforced. Employees who worked extra hours without compensation could file a complaint with the Labor Welfare Board; however, the board's rulings were not binding.

Every worker has the right to 15 days of annual leave during the first year of continual employment and 30 days per year thereafter.

The law states that employers must not place their employees in situations involving dangerous work; however, the law does not specifically grant a worker the right to remove himself from dangerous work without jeopardy to his continued employment. All employers were required by law to provide first aid facilities. Employees covered under the labor law could recover compensation for job-related injury or illness through employer-provided medical insurance. Inspectors from the Department of Health and Safety of the Directorate of Labor generally enforced the health and safety standard codes. As required by law, they made regular onsite inspections. During the year, there were no reports of significant problems.

Foreign workers constituted at least 50 percent of the work force and as much as 80 percent of the private sector work force. There continued to be reports that employers or male coworkers sexually harassed and abused foreign females employed as domestic servants and hospital nurses. Foreign women, employed as domestic servants and garment workers, have claimed that their employers withheld their salaries, and that government officials were unresponsive to their grievances, due to investigative procedures that disadvantaged the victim. Foreign female workers at times had to ask their governments' embassies for shelter to escape abuse (see Section 5). Many South Asian governments provided repatriation for destitute nationals.