



Saudi Arabia

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2007](#)

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, ruled by the Al Saud family, with a population of 22.7 million, including 6.1 million foreigners. Since 2005, King Abdullah bin Abd Al-Aziz Al Saud has ruled the Kingdom and serves as custodian of Islam's two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina. The government bases its legitimacy in governance according to its interpretation of Islamic law (Shari'a) and the 1992 Basic Law. The Basic Law sets out the system of government, rights of citizens, the powers and duties of the government. The law also provides that the Koran and the Traditions (Sunna) of the Prophet Muhammad serve as the country's constitution. In December 2005 the country held male-only elections on a nonparty basis for half of the members of municipal councils, the first elections for any government position since 1963. The civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces.

During the year, the following significant human rights problems were reported: no right to peacefully change the government; infliction of severe pain by judicially sanctioned corporal punishments; beatings and other abuse; arbitrary arrest and detention, sometimes incommunicado; denial of fair public trials; political prisoners; exemption for the rule of law for some individuals and lack of judicial independence; restrictions on civil liberties such as the freedoms of speech, including the Internet, assembly, association, movement, and religion; corruption and lack of government transparency. Violence against women and discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, sect, and ethnicity were common. Limitations on the rights of foreign workers remained a severe problem.

Improvements during the year included less restriction on some issues reported in the media, including complaints against the government and a lifting of restrictions on several banned books. According to human rights activists from an unlicensed nongovernmental organization (NGO), the Ministry of Interior (MOI) allegedly sought to enforce a ban on the use of torture by police officers and dismissed some officers failing to adhere to this ban. Sources reported that women's participation in the teaching, nursing, and care-provider professions increased.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

The government and/or its agents did not commit any politically motivated killings; however, several individuals died after beatings that took place while in the custody of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), also known as the religious police or Mutawwa'in. The government executed persons for criminal offenses after closed trials, making it impossible to determine whether the accused persons were allowed to present a defense or were denied basic due process.

On May 23, religious police allegedly beat to death 28-year-old Suleiman al-Huraisi who was detained for the possession and sale of alcohol. After a three-month investigation, MOI officials charged two members of the religious police. On November 28, a court citing lack of evidence acquitted them.

On June 1, a member of the religious police reportedly arrested Ahmad al-Bulawi in Tabuk on suspicion of being in "illegal seclusion" with an unrelated woman. An autopsy revealed he had been beaten on his face before dying at the religious police center. On July 30, the Tabuk General Investigation and Prosecution Authority ruled that the arresting authorities, members of the religious police and a security guard, were not guilty of any wrongdoing.

During the week of August 5, a Bangladeshi man died in Medina while in the custody of the religious police. They arrested him for allegedly washing a car while he should have been attending prayers. The head of the religious police, Ibrahim al-Gaith, claimed that the man had fainted and that there were no signs of assault. At year's end the case was pending with the Shari'a court of Medina.

b. Disappearance

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

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

The Basic Law prohibits torture, and Shari'a prohibits judges from accepting confessions obtained under duress. Nevertheless, there were reports of authorities physically abusing and torturing prisoners. The National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), a human rights organization originally endowed by King Fahd, received complaints of torture by the religious police, the General Administration of Narcotics Control, and the Directorate of General Investigations. According to the NSHR, detainees and prisoners were subjected to torture, abuse, and violence during interrogation and were coerced into signing confessions.

During the year, the nonlicensed domestic human rights group Human Rights First reported that during the past four years there was a significant decline in the use of torture in prisons including the formal banning of the use of torture and dismissal of some officials who failed to implement this ban.

MOI officials were responsible for most alleged incidents of physical abuse and torture of prisoners, including beatings, lashings, and suspension from bars by handcuffs. On April 18, an Internet news site SABQ.org posted five video clips of a prison guard beating prisoners at the al-Ha'ir Correctional Facility. The videos show a prison guard repeatedly beating the prisoners on the palms of their outstretched hands and the soles of one prisoner's feet.

During the year the religious police harassed and detained citizens and foreigners of both sexes. According to the NSHR report covering the 2006 calendar year, they received numerous complaints of beatings, humiliation, confiscation of personal property and unnecessary body searches and the use of coercion to sign confessions.

During the year according to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the press reported 153 beheadings of individuals who were convicted of murder, narcotics-related offenses, and armed robbery, as well as of rape, sorcery and adultery.

The government also punished persons for various offenses with amputations for theft, and lashings, including for alcohol-related offenses or for being alone in the company of an unrelated person of the opposite sex. In contrast to previous years, there were no reports of lashings in the women's prisons.

In March 2006 in Qatif, seven men found a woman and her male companion together in a car and gang-raped them both. The perpetrators were sentenced to between eight months and five years in prison and between 80 and 1,000 lashes. The same court also sentenced the woman and her ex-boyfriend to 90 lashes for being unmarried and alone in a car with an unmarried person of the opposite sex at the time of the incident. On November 14, after her lawyer requested a review of the case, the Higher Court of Justice sent the case back to the Qatif General Court which increased the woman's sentence from 90 lashes to 200 lashes and six months in prison and increased the perpetrators sentences to between two and nine years each. The court also suspended her lawyer, Abdulrahman al-Lahem, for "insulting the Supreme Judicial Council and disobeying the rules and regulations," reportedly for his efforts to publicize the woman's case. The court confiscated al-Lahem's license and asked him to appear before a disciplinary session at the Judicial Investigation Department of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). On November 24, the MOJ issued a statement "clarifying" the role of the two victims who "exposed" themselves to the crime because of their behavior. The statement stated that because the victims were alone in the car, they had violated Shari'a and were thus liable for punishment. On December 17, King Abdullah pardoned both victims, citing his authority to overrule judgments not specifically prescribed by Islamic legal code.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Unlike the previous year, there were no reported prison visits by the governmental Human Right Commission (HRC) or the NSHR. In 2006 both the HRC and the NSHR visited prisons, and these visits were in accordance with international standard modalities. The NSHR visited and reported abuses in 20 prisons and detention centers.

During the visits in 2006 the HRC and NSHR found that there were some prisons and detention centers with below-acceptable standards in hygiene, food, medical, and social services, and prolonged detention of detainees and prisoners in poor health and brutalization by guards. Also in 2006, many detention centers and prisons remained overcrowded, and some prisoners served their sentence yet were detained for additional unlimited periods of time.

In the Western Province, media and international human rights organizations reported that during the year poor health conditions existed in some prisons and detention centers. According to the March 9 article published by London-based newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat*, authorities reacted slowly to the NSHR on prison conditions, including prisoners suffering from tuberculosis. In January, according to the newspaper *Al Watan*, two prisoners at a prison in Jizan died of tuberculosis. In an April HRW report, prisoners were cited as claiming that seven prisoners had died at the Buraiman prison in Jeddah, mostly as a result of tuberculosis. While the government investigated the deaths, it had not released any information by

year's end. Similarly, in April, HRW reported detainees' accounts of the conditions in a deportation center in Jeddah. HRW cited the death of a Bangladeshi man following a 25-day hunger strike as well as the death of a woman's infant, who died from hypothermia and malnourishment.

Consular visits to prisoners were restricted. Notification of relevant consulates in the cases of several dual national prisoners was delayed. In several cases involving the internal security police that dealt with cases of allegations of terrorism, threats to internal security, organized crime, and espionage, consular access was granted slowly and only with assistance from other consular offices and the sending of diplomatic notes. During consular visits, officers from the internal security police were present.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The Basic Law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and limits the period of arrest to five days without charges being filed; however, because of ambiguous implementation of the law and a lack of due process, the MOI maintains broad powers to detain persons indefinitely. In practice, persons were held for weeks or months and sometimes longer.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The king, the minister of interior, the minister of defense, and the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) commander all have responsibility in law and in practice of law enforcement and maintenance of order. King Abdullah remained in command of the SANG. Crown Prince Sultan, the minister of defense and aviation, had responsibility for all of that ministry's military armed forces. The minister of interior, exercised control over government internal security forces, the internal security police (Mabahith), the Directorate of General Investigation, the General Administration of Narcotics Control, and border forces. The General Intelligence Presidency (GIP), reporting directly to the king, is the government's primary external intelligence agency and maintained its own forces. The religious police constitute a semiautonomous agency, which reports to the king via the Royal Diwan (royal court). The MOI also has undefined oversight role of the religious police. The religious police monitor public behavior to enforce strict adherence to conservative Islamic norms. There were no reports of investigations of security forces during the year.

Arrest and Detention

According to the criminal procedure legislation, "no person shall be arrested, searched, detained, or imprisoned except in cases provided by law and any accused person shall have the right to seek the assistance of a lawyer or a representative to defend him during the investigation and trial stages." Any person can be summoned to be investigated and an arrest warrant can be issued based on sufficient evidence. The law also prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention. However, in practice, persons were held weeks, months, and sometimes longer without due process. The regular police, the religious police, if accompanied by a regular police officer, and the internal security police can arrest and detain persons. However, in practice, the authorities arrested and detained persons without following legal guidelines.

On February 2, according to HRW, internal security police arrested Isam Basrawi, and five other men, all of whom are prominent reform advocates, as well as Basrawi's assistant. Police arrested another associate in his car in Jeddah, and two others in Medina. The eight men arrested on February 2 were: Sulaiman al-Rashudi, Abd al-Rahman al-Shumairi, Abdulaziz al-Khurajji, Sa'ud Mukhtar al-Hashimi, Musa al-Qarni, al-Sharif Saif al-Din Shahin and Hussain al-Sadiqi. Also according to HRW, on March 16, police arrested former judge Sulaiman al-Rashudi, who reportedly intended to sue the Ministry of Interior over its failure to charge and speedily try detainees in internal security service prisons. At year's end the men remained in prison. They have not been charged; however, there were allegations in the media that they financed terrorism outside the country.

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

Regulations provide bail for less serious crimes, although authorities sometimes released detainees on the recognizance of a patron or sponsoring employer without payment of bail.

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

The religious police generally complied with the requirement that a police officer accompany them at the time of an arrest. However, there were cases in which religious police detained persons without the presence of a police officer. In the more conservative Nejd region, including Riyadh, there continued to be reports that religious police accosted, abused, arrested, and detained citizens and noncitizens, especially women, for allegedly violating dress and behavior standards. There were also several reports of religious police in Mecca taking similar actions.

The risk of harassment was substantial. The religious police detained men for offenses that included eating in restaurants with women not related to them, making lewd remarks to women in shopping malls, following cars lawfully transporting women, or walking in groups through family-only sections of shopping centers. Young unmarried men are prohibited from entering most shopping malls. Religious police detained women of many nationalities for actions such as riding in a taxi with a man who was not her relative, appearing with her head uncovered in shopping malls, and eating in restaurants with males who were not her relatives. Some detainees were held for days, sometimes weeks, without officials notifying families or, in the case of noncitizens, embassies.

Authorities may detain without charge, or charge with attempting to destabilize the government, persons who publicly criticize the government.

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

The government continued to discriminate against and detain members of the Shi'a minority. According to community leaders in the Al-Ahsa region during the year internal security police forces increased arrests of Shi'a for such activities as propagating their beliefs and organizing or participating in informal, recurring social gatherings with other Shi'a. Allegedly, these arrests are often made on little more than the suspicion of participation. Detainees are typically held in custody less than a month, and often released without explanation.

Citizens can report abuses by security forces at any police station, to the governmental HRC, and to the NSHR; however, no information was available on the results of complaints.

Amnesty

During the year the government continued its tradition of pardoning or granting amnesty on special occasions, including holy days and during Ramadan. Approximately 15,000 prisoners were granted amnesty during the year.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Basic Law provides for an independent judiciary. The courts do not have jurisdiction over senior members of the royal family. Some members and associates of the royal family have influenced judges. The Supreme Judicial Council, whose members are appointed by the king, appoints, transfers, and removes judges. The MOJ disciplines judges. The Basic Law allows for a public trial; however, most trials were closed. Juries are not used. Despite laws providing for suspects' rights to legal counsel and requiring public trials, most trials were held in secret and without defense lawyers.

There are two types of courts: Shari'a and special. The legal system is based on the government's interpretation of Islamic law in all courts. The law makes no distinction among court systems concerning the rights available to defendants in criminal cases. Courts exercise jurisdiction over common criminal cases and civil suits regarding marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Their jurisdiction extends to non-Muslims for crimes committed in the country. Cases involving relatively small penalties were tried in summary courts. More serious crimes are adjudicated in courts of common pleas from which appeals may be made to the courts of appeal. Special courts include commercial courts.

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

According to businessmen, courts were ineffective and slow, court procedures were not well established, and judges possessed religious rather than legal training. They also complained that judges often acted capriciously and did not base judgments on precedent, leading to widely divergent rulings.

According to press reports, on October 2, the king allocated \$1.9 billion dollars (7.1 billion riyals) for judicial reforms in the country. Reforms had not been implemented by year's end.

The government permitted Shi'a citizens to use their own Jaafari legal tradition to adjudicate cases involving domestic issues, inheritance, and Islamic endowments. During the year the MOJ allowed for an increase in the size of the Shi'a court system. The Jaafari system, with jurisdiction over cases in Al-Ahsa/Qatif area only, consisted of two basic courts, each with two judges in Qatif and Al-Ahsa and a three judge appeals court of first instance in Qatif. The Jaafari courts, however, have limited power. For example, if a litigant disagreed with the Shi'a court's decision, that person could seek a verdict in a Sunni court which would overrule any previous determination. In September in response to these limits, the Jaafari judges threatened to resign if more power was not granted to the court. By year's end no new authority was granted to the court but the judges had not resigned.

Cases of non-Muslims and foreigners were handled in Shari'a courts.

The military justice system has jurisdiction over uniformed personnel and civil servants who are charged with violations of military regulations. The defense minister and the king review the decisions of military tribunals. There are no special security courts.

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

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

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

On November 14, authorities suspended Abdulrahman al-Lahem, the lawyer for the female victim in the March 2006 Qatif rape, and confiscated his license to practice because of his attempts to publicize the case.

On June 16, Rizana Nafeek, a Sri Lankan maid, faced beheading after a panel of three Shari'a judges found her guilty of murdering an infant in her care. Nafeek had no legal representation. In addition, because she was allegedly provided forged documents in Sri Lanka, she may have been 17 at the time the child under her care died. At year's end Nafeek continued to wait for the court to hear her appeal; the infant's family has continuously refused to consider clemency.

Trial Procedures

The Criminal Procedure Law provides persons under investigation the right to a lawyer and permits lawyers to present arguments in criminal courts. The law also provides that convicted persons be informed of their right to appeal rulings. An attorney is not provided at public expense. Defendants have the right to confront or question witnesses against them; however witnesses are questioned before the initiation of a trial and not during the trial. Defendants have access to government-held evidence relevant to their cases. The majority of trials are closed to the public but the accused may request to have a public trial.

In a Shari'a court, the testimony of one man equals that of two women. Under the Hanbali interpretation of Shari'a, judges may discount the testimony of persons who are nonpracticing Muslims or who do not adhere to Hanbali doctrine. Legal sources reported that testimony by Shi'a was often ignored in courts of law or was deemed to have less weight than testimony by Sunnis.

Female parties in court proceedings such as divorce and family law cases generally had to deputize male relatives to speak on their behalf. In the absence of two witnesses, or four witnesses in the case of adultery, confessions before a judge were almost always required for criminal conviction--a situation that has led prosecuting authorities to coerce confessions from suspects by threats and abuse.

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

Shari'a considers Hindus to be polytheists and on this basis justifies discrimination in calculating accidental death or injury compensation. According to the country's Hanbali interpretation of Shari'a, once a court determines fault, a Muslim male receives 100 percent of the amount of compensation determined, a Jew or Christian male receives 50 percent, and all others receive one-sixteenth of the amount a Muslim male receives. Women receive 50 percent of what men receive in each of these categories.

Provincial governors, and members of the royal family, have authority to reduce a sentence. In cases between two individuals, the wronged party has the right to accept money or impose no punishment instead of the punishment decreed by the judge. Senior members of the royal family were not subject to the same rule of law as ordinary citizens.

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

Political Prisoners and Detainees

According to the HRW, on July 16, the internal security police arrested two prominent reformers, Dr. Abdullah al-Hamid, a lawyer, who had previously been jailed for 17 months after organizing a petition that called for the country to become a constitutional monarchy, and 'Isa al-Hamid, his brother. On November 9, HRW reported that the Partial Court in Buraida sentenced the al-Hamid brothers on November 7. Professor Abdullah al-Hamid received a four-month prison term while 'Isa al Hamid received a six-month sentence, each for instigating a public demonstration during which women peacefully protested the continued detention of relatives without charge or trial, according press reports.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The Basic Law provides for an independent and impartial judiciary in civil matters, but the judiciary lacks jurisdiction over some members of the royal family, whose members and associates influence judicial decisions. There were reports of lawsuits seeking damages for, or cessation of, human rights violations. There were administrative and judicial remedies available for alleged violations. There were significant problems enforcing domestic court orders.

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

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

Despite these provisions, customs officials routinely opened mail and shipments to search for contraband, including material deemed pornographic or that appeared to be non-Sunni Islamic religious material. The authorities also opened mail and used informants and wiretaps in internal security and criminal matters. Informants and, in some districts, an informal system of ward bosses reported "seditious ideas," antigovernment activity, or "behavior contrary to Islam" in their neighborhoods to the MOI.

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

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

Religious police practices and incidents of abuse varied widely across the country. According to an official 2006 report, there were 4,957 field officers working in 1,310 centers in all 13 provinces. In certain areas, the religious police and freelance religious vigilantes harassed, abused, arrested, and detained citizens and foreigners. At year's end there was no updated data regarding these incidents.

Religious police enforcement of strict standards of social behavior included closing commercial establishments during the five daily prayer observances, insisting upon compliance with strict norms of public dress, and dispersing gatherings of women in public places designated for men, as well as preventing unaccompanied men from entering public places designated for families. Religious police frequently reproached both citizen and foreign women for failure to observe strict dress codes and arrested men and women found together who were not married or closely related.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Basic Law does not provide for freedom of speech or the press and the government generally did not respect these rights in practice. According to the Basic Law, the media's role is to educate the masses and promote national unity. Media

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

The government continued to enforce existing laws based on Article 12 of the Basic Law, which provides the state with the authority to "prevent anything that may lead to disunity, sedition, and separation." In theory, all public employees are enjoined from "participating, directly or indirectly, in the preparation of any document, speech or petition, engaging in dialogue with local and foreign media, or participating in any meetings intended to oppose the state's policies." Academics from public universities did, however, criticize government institutions such as the Ministry of Commerce, public schools and hospitals, and the religious police in the local press.

In May and June the press extensively covered the deaths of two citizens that were allegedly caused by members of the religious police. The deaths resulted in significant criticism--both in the print press and in online forums--with many commentators demanding a public trial for members of the religious police.

The print media were censored and privately owned; some owners had close ties to members of the royal family. Journalists routinely practiced self-censorship by refraining from direct criticism of government officials. An unwritten, yet routinely followed media policy prohibits the dissemination of criticism of the royal family and the government. A 1982 government media policy statement urges journalists to uphold Islam, oppose atheism, promote Arab interests, and preserve the cultural heritage. The Ministry of Culture and Information must approve the appointment of and may remove all senior editors. The government provides guidelines to newspapers regarding controversial issues. The government-owned Press Agency reports on official government news. All newspapers in the country must be licensed by the government.

Members of the royal family owned two London-based Arabic dailies, *Asharq al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat*.

On August 27, the Ministry of Culture and Information prevented the distribution of *Al-Hayat* newspaper, confiscating 250,000 copies from retailers countrywide. According to a variety of news sources the halted distribution stemmed from the ministry's disapproval of the Western-style format and criticism of local issues; others ascribed the shutdown to a specific article in the confiscated edition of *Al-Hayat* that implied a link between respected religious scholars and terrorism. *Al-Hayat* was permitted to resume publication four days later.

The Saudi Journalist Association operates under a government charter. Membership is voluntary and open to both men and women. Although theoretically noncitizen journalists working in the country were eligible to join as non-voting members, some foreign journalists alleged that the association was effectively open only to citizens. While noncitizens can technically become members, they have no voting rights, and may not attend the General Assembly. The organization's nine-member board of directors includes two women, all approved by the Ministry of Culture and Information.

In July the English language press reported that media personnel gathered in Jeddah to discuss press liberalization in the country indicated that access to basic information--especially government statistics and commentary on policies--was limited.

In January during the visit of the Spanish minister of justice Juan Fernando Lopez Aguilar, four female journalists were denied access to Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University, where the minister was to give a lecture. Security guards employed by the university and enforcing university regulations indicated that women are strictly banned from the men's campus. The incident resulted in the cancellation of the lecture.

Prominent Shi'a intellectuals often had difficulty publishing Shi'a related stories in national media. In January one writer and activist contacted various newspapers about a story he had drafted explaining the significance of the Ashura Shi'a holiday. Unable to find a national media outlet willing to accept the story, he published the article in Bahrain.

The government owned and operated most domestic television and radio channels. In domestically broadcast programs, government censors removed any reference in foreign programs and songs to politics, religions other than Islam, pork or pigs, alcohol and sex. Private, Saudi-owned satellite networks operated freely in the country. Local offices of the MBC, Orbit and ART media groups, while headquartered outside of the country, operated under a system of self-censorship. Many other foreign satellite stations broadcast a wide range of programs into the country.

There are no private radio stations in the country. In February Okaz newspaper reported that the Saudi Investment Authority, which grants business licenses to investors wishing to initiate business operations, received 30 applications for new, private media outlets in the country; however, the minister of culture and information had not approved the license

requests. At year's end these requests were still pending.

Although technically illegal, there were several million satellite-receiving dishes in the country that provided citizens with foreign television programming. Access to outside sources of information, such as Arabic and Western satellite television channels and the Internet was widespread. Foreign television programming was not censored by the government. Royal or affluent merchant families own most of the media companies that brought foreign television programming to the country via satellite.

During the year the Consultative Council (Majlis Al-Shura) continued delayed television coverage of some of its proceedings. Sessions were open to print journalists, and Channel 1 broadcast Council deliberations twice weekly. According to the online electronic journal *Al-Sabaq*, Khalid al-Madkhali, anchor of government-owned Al-Ekhbariah TV, was suspended for his provocative questions during an interview with religious scholar and President of the Consultative Council Sheikh Saleh al-Hameed. Al-Madkhali was reinstated after Sheikh Saleh al-Hameed indicated that he was not offended.

On June 6, according to Amnesty International (AI), university professor Sa'id Bin Zu'air was arrested on charges of financially aiding terrorists; other sources have argued that he may have been arrested to prevent him from appearing on Al-Jazeera and criticizing the government. He remained detained at year's end.

The government continued to ban books, magazines, and other materials that it considered sexual or pornographic. The Ministry of Culture and Information banned publications from being sold in the country on a case-by-case basis.

In January the press reported that literary critic Saad Al-Bazae published a book entitled "The Jewish Component in Western Civilization," which promoted Jewish contributions in history. The Riyadh International Book Fair included this book, and included other titles, also by citizens, that were previously excluded including "Girls of Riyadh" by Rajaa Al-Sanae and several books by Turki Al-Hamad.

Internet Freedom

The government restricted access to the Internet, and Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC) reportedly monitors e-mail and Internet chat rooms. During the year, more individuals and groups exchanged views via the Internet, including by electronic mail and blogs. The government continued to block access to Web sites which it deemed sexual, pornographic, politically offensive, "un-Islamic", or disruptive because of controversial religious and political content.

Access to the Internet was available only through local government-monitored servers. According to the Communications and Information Technology Commission, there were approximately 2.3 million subscribers and users. Some citizens circumvented controls by accessing the Internet through servers in other countries. The government had a process through which citizens could request reconsideration of a decision to block a particular Web site, and authorities reportedly at least partially unblocked some Web sites.

The law criminalizes defamation on the Internet, hacking, unauthorized access to government Web sites, and stealing information related to national security. At year's end there were no reported prosecutions.

Early in the year, according to press reports, a Web site managed by Ra'if Badawi dealing with alleged transgressions on the religious police was closed.

Several times during the year, according to a foreign press report, telecommunications authorities blocked www.member-alhewar.com, the "Dialogue and Creativity" Internet forum of Ali al-Dumaini, a political reform activist, where members sought to discuss issues of human rights, tolerance, and democracy.

On December 10, security agents detained Fouad Ahmed al-Farhan, a blogger with the popular pro-reform Web site *Alfarhan.org*, and questioned him "about violating non-security regulations." In one of his last posts before his detention, al-Farhan sharply criticized 10 influential business, religious, and media figures.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

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

There were fewer restrictions on the annual Riyadh book fair which took place in February, than in the past. Religious police were required to wear identity badges. The Book Fair also featured more mixed gender, "family" days with nine of the total 10 days for families and a new physical layout that allowed greater participation of women in all cultural activities,

including entrances that facilitated women's access. Also, a woman participated in a panel discussion with men for the first time with her voice piped in from another room. Additionally, the Book Fair featured previously taboo subjects such as mythology and gender studies.

The government censored public artistic expression and prohibited cinemas and public musical or theatrical performances, except those considered folkloric. Media personalities called for vigilance during the annual al-Janadriyyah Cultural Festival in March to ensure that there were no disturbances by conservatives and religious police.

Cultural fora sponsored by private citizens continued to operate, although one forum on youth issues planned for the spring was cancelled by the government because of a rumor the event would be mixed gender. The government instructed fora hosts not to invite foreign participants, and to avoid discussing political matters. In the first part of the year, citizens in the Hofuf community reported the forced closing of all 12 formally organized social forums in the Al-Ahsa region, both Sunni and Shi'a.

The government restricts the public showing of films; there are no movie theaters open to the public.

On January 16, the newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat* reported that the religious police prohibited the Eastern Province Literary Club, based in Dammam, from screening the Iranian movie *At Five in the Afternoon*. The film, directed by Iranian director Samira Makhmalbaf, discusses the new opportunities for women in Afghanistan following the fall of the Taliban regime. Some members of the club believed the religious police objected to the showing of the film on the grounds that it expressed the point of view of a Shi'a woman.

Public performance of plays and music were allowed if traditional and part of a special event. In August, despite limited access, an all-female cast presented a play entitled "The Mother's House," which was well received by the female public in Riyadh and Abha.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

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

Public meetings were usually segregated by gender. However, Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and other commercial and medical gatherings are frequently mixed gender. At media press conferences, female journalists may be restricted to the front row seats, rather than provided a separate room with closed-circuit television. The authorities monitored large, nonfamily gatherings, particularly if women were present. The religious police dispersed any large non-family groups found in public places, such as restaurants. However, men and women can mix in some public places that cater to noncitizens. In Jeddah, a local Saudi-American business group routinely held its general meetings in a hotel where male and female citizens and noncitizen participants mix freely. On July 19, five women were arrested after they held a sit-in outside of a prison to advocate for timely trials for relatives who had been imprisoned. Unlike in 2006, there were no government-permitted peaceful political demonstrations during the year.

Freedom of Association

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

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

For example, human rights activist Ibrahim al-Mugaiteeb and his group HRFS applied for a license for HRFS in November 2002, and despite its continued activity, the group, received no response to his request by year's end. As the group is formally "unlicensed" it remained unclear which group activities were permitted, and which could draw criticism or punishment from the government.

On September 11, according to HRW, a group of citizens presented a second request, following an initial 2003 request, to the minister of social affairs to register the "National Saudi Committee for Human Rights." By year's end, there was no reply; the 2003 request was followed by a 2004 arrest of several members of the group, after they publicly petitioned for a constitution, among other proposals.

On September 23, a group calling itself the Association for the Protection and Defense of Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia

transmitted a petition with 1,100 signatures to the king asking for a repeal of the ban on women driving. At year's end there was no government reply. According to HRW, the group received a warning against mounting any demonstrations. The association did not have any legal status at year's end.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Basic Law states that Islam is the official religion. All citizens are required to be Muslims. The legal system is based on the government-sanctioned interpretation of Islamic law.

There is no legal recognition or protection of religious freedom, and it was severely restricted in practice. The government limited the practice of all but the officially-sanctioned version of Islam and prohibited the public practice of other religions, including Shi'a and Sufi sects. The government stated that as a matter of public policy it protects the right to private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious services. However, this right was not always respected in practice and is not defined in law.

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

Conversion by a Muslim to another religion is considered apostasy, a crime punishable by death if the accused does not recant. There have been no reports of executions for apostasy since 1992.

Citizens and especially foreigners were widely accused of believing in and sometimes practicing "magic" and "superstition." Under the government's interpretation of Shari'a, magic was regarded as one of the worst forms of polytheism, and is an executable offense; however, in practice, individuals convicted of magic were infrequently executed. An unknown number of detainees were held in prison on the charge of "sorcery" or the alleged practice of "black magic" or "witchcraft." According to news reports in October, an anti-sorcery department of the religious police branch in Taif, reported arresting 25 "charlatans" in the past year, and that allegedly only one was a citizen. On November 23, police officers in Taif arrested a Nigerian woman for alleged "witchcraft." No further information was available concerning her case or those of the other detainees at year's end.

During the year there were fewer reports of confiscation of religious materials at the airports in Jeddah and Dhahran, and fewer religious police raids on religious gatherings in the Western Hijaz region and in the Eastern Province. In addition, there were reports of larger public and private celebrations of Shi'a holidays in Qatif.

For example, the January Ashura commemorations (marking the martyrdom of Imam Hussein during the first ten days of the Islamic New Year) in January were the largest in recent history and were allowed to be held in every village in the Shi'a-dominated Qatif area. A large public performance with more than 10,000 persons in attendance took place depicting the death of Imam Hussein. In the mixed Sunni/Shi'a Al-Ahsa area, public celebrations of Ashoura were prohibited. Local province leaders instead conducted a blood drive and shops were allowed to close to commemorate the holiday.

On March 9, the government allowed community celebrations of the Shi'a Arbaeen holiday (marking the fortieth day after Imam Hussein's death) in a Qatif village but prohibited these celebrations in Al-Ahsa and Dammam. However, even in Qatif, the government limited the scope of certain religious processions.

In Al-Ahsa, celebrations surrounding the "Gergean" holiday resulted in police actions and arrest. Gergean, which occurs on the eve of the 15th day of Ramadan, is a street festival noted for children passing from house to house singing and collecting nuts and sweets from villagers. On September 25, the Ministry of Education in Al-Ahsa issued a decision banning the celebration of the Gergean festival. The ministry decision banning the commemoration quoted a 1993 fatwa (issued by the Permanent Committee for Scholastic Research and Religious Opinion) that stated such a celebration "is a heresy with no origins in Islam and every heresy is an aberration and should be abandoned and warned against and should not be celebrated anywhere, neither in schools nor establishments nor anywhere else." On September 27, security forces raided the King Fahd neighborhood in Al-Ahsa and destroyed all signs and decorations celebrating Gergean. On November 21, a resident of the Akar neighborhood in Al-Ahsa was arrested on charges that two months earlier he had marked the festivity by giving sweets to children. The man was released after seven days imprisonment.

In August the Saudi Arabian Airlines' Web site warned that non-Islamic religious items brought by foreign visitors would be confiscated. After the airline's policy was questioned by the press and foreign government officials, the ban was lifted.

Throughout the year there continued to be instances in which Sunni imams, who are paid government stipends, used anti-Jewish, anti-Christian, and anti-Shi'a language in their sermons including from the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. The HRC complained to the government about such sermons. Reportedly the Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA) disciplined a few imams and dismissed others.

In April a Shi'a activist was arrested after sponsoring a Shi'a religious gathering in his home. He was later released after

-serving one week of his one month sentence. Also in April domestic intelligence police arrested small numbers of Shi'a citizens for organizing celebrations of the Prophet's birthday.

In Maya Filipino Christian was deported after eight months in detention and sixty lashes. In October 2006 police had arrested him in Jeddah and falsely charged him with drug possession. The police later dropped those charges and formally charged him with proselytizing.

In May a citizen was arrested, later released, and then rearrested because he had converted to Christianity. The man claimed that security forces tortured him. At year's end no information was available on a scheduled trial.

On June 23, Sheikh Saleh al-Fawzan, a senior member of the Senior Council of Ulema member, issued a fatwa that seemed to define "liberals" as non-Muslims, which many viewed as grounds for violence against liberals. No violence ensued; however, on June 26, although he did not retract the *fatwa*, Sheikh al-Fawzan clarified his statement, rejecting any suggestion of violence.

In December 2006 the religious police raided a private gathering of the Ahmadiyya religious group, an Islamic community. **Reportedly, the religious police detained** 49 noncitizen members, including children. In January other Ahmadiyya foreign workers were arrested. The government reported that it deported approximately 150 persons, all noncitizens. In February two more Ahmadiyya noncitizens were arrested in Riyadh and deported. The government provided no explanation for their arrests or for the deportations.

At year's end, Hadi al-Mutif, Sulaimani Ismaili Shi'a, remained imprisoned for "insulting the Prophet Muhammad." In his first trial in 1996, al-Mutif was sentenced to death. Reportedly the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, and al-Mutif has served at least 12 years. In response to his two suicide attempts reported by NGOs, the government has kept him in isolation since January.

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

Under the Hanbali interpretation of Shari'a, judges may discount the testimony of non-Muslims or those who do not adhere to "correct doctrine." Islamic religious education was mandatory in public schools at all levels. Regardless of the Islamic tradition to which their families adhere, all public school children receive religious instruction that conforms to the conservative Hanbali tradition of Sunni Islam. Expatriate non-Muslim students in private schools were not required to study Islam.

There were reports that religious police pressured employers and sponsors to reach verbal agreements with non-Muslim employees that they would not participate in private or public non-Muslim worship services.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

The Shi'a Muslim minority, estimated to be between 8 and 10 percent of the citizen population, lived mostly in the Eastern Province, although a significant number resided in the Western Province and in Najran in the southwest. Members were subjected to officially sanctioned discrimination of various forms.

The government appointed more Shi'a judges to the Ja'afari courts in the Eastern Province and one Shi'a and one Ismaili to the board of the HRC. While they constituted approximately 40 percent of the Eastern Province population, no Shi'a served as regional sub-governors or mayors in the Eastern Province, and only three of the 59 government-appointed municipal council members were Shi'a.

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

On January 21, former Senior Council of Ulema member Abdullah bin Abdulrahman bin Jibrin called Shi'a "rejectionists"

and claimed that Shi'a work with Christians to kill Sunni Muslims, especially in Iraq. He also claimed that Shi'a are liars, apostates, and heretics, and called for the expulsion of Shi'a from Muslim countries.

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

There were reports that some non-Muslim foreign workers were targeted by Muslim co-workers and accused falsely of proselytizing, knowing that the non-Muslims would be censured and possibly deported. There were reports that some sponsors withheld pay and residence renewal based on religious factors.

According to the Anti-Defamation League, there was anti-Semitism in the media, characterized by stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols, and comparisons of Israeli government actions to those of the Nazis. Anti-Semitic editorial comments appeared in the government and private print and electronic media.

In November 2006 the government announced a multi-year project to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to promote tolerance and remove content disparaging religions other than Islam. During the year the government reported that a process to revise the textbooks to eliminate intolerant and discriminatory language was underway. While some progress has been made in this regard, there were intolerant statements toward religious groups that remained at year's end. Public officials, teachers, and government-paid imams continued to make such statements. Some teachers were removed from the classroom for this practice.

For a more detailed discussion, see the [2007 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

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

The Basic Law does not provide for these rights.

Freedom of movement was restricted. The government restricted this right for women based on its interpretation of Islamic law. All women in the country were prohibited from driving. The government must issue an exit visa for an individual to leave the country. Male citizens under the age of 21 require the permission of their guardian if they want to travel outside the country. Foreign women married to citizens, or minor and single adult daughters of citizen fathers, must obtain written permission from a male relative. Women can obtain their own photo identity cards, although the government required permission from a male relative or guardian. Citizen women with valid passports can obtain identity cards on the basis of her own passport; however, if a woman does not have a passport, she needs a male guardian to verify her identity. During the year the government continued to issue national identity cards to women, despite a 2006 national campaign against the practice by some religious conservatives.

Noncitizen women married to citizens required permission from their husbands or fathers to travel. If a husband refused to grant permission to travel to his noncitizen wife, she could divorce her husband or not travel. If she divorced her husband, the government could issue her an exit visa, but she was unlikely to be allowed to re-enter the country. Women may not leave the country without the permission of a close male relative. Females and minor children, even those with dual nationality, may also be subject to "black listing" by government entities or family members wishing to prohibit their travel. Women may not rent furnished apartment on their own, but they may rent unfurnished apartments. Restrictions on travel apply to all children, females of any age, and adult males (until they receive a passport after the age of 21) of citizen fathers. In practice female residents of various nationalities are subject to travel restrictions. In cases involving custody disputes of citizens or resident noncitizens, the male guardian is legally able to prevent the travel of his spouse and his minor and adult children out of the country.

Foreigners were allowed to reside or work in the country under the sponsorship of a citizen or business. On September 18, the Council of Ministers approved new regulations that would make it easier for foreign businessmen to visit the country. The council agreed to permit foreign businessmen to acquire a 12-month, multiple-entry visa without an invitation from a local company or letter of introduction from the Chamber of Commerce. The new visa regulations, as well as the introduction of online visa applications, are part of an effort to attract greater foreign investment and remove bureaucratic obstacles to creating more partnerships between foreign and local investors.

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

During the year the government continued to provide citizenship under Article 9 of the law on naturalization facilitating the acquisition of citizenship for certain foreigners and to some of the thousands of native residents who live in the country without possessing citizenship. Some stateless Arab residents (Bidoon) are unable to obtain passports and have limited ability to travel abroad.

The Basic Law prohibits employers from retaining foreign workers' passports; however, in practice, most sponsors reportedly retained possession of foreign workers' passports. Foreign workers must obtain permission from their sponsors to travel abroad. If sponsors were involved in a commercial or labor dispute with foreign employees, they may ask the authorities to prohibit the employees from departing the country until the dispute is resolved. In some contract disputes, sponsors used this leverage to force employees to accept disadvantageous settlements or be deported.

The government seized the passports of all potential suspects and witnesses in criminal cases and suspended the issuance of exit visas to these individuals until the case was concluded. As a result, some foreign nationals were forced to remain in the country for lengthy periods against their will.

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

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

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

According to the NSHR, some Shi'a activist writers and public figures have been stripped of their identity cards for as long as 15 years and denied any document proving their nationality because they had allegedly illegally acquired national identity. In this group, some had papers proving that they had been serving in government posts for long periods. Others had their identity cards taken away. After a royal order to verify and correct the data, they were told that their tribal origin had not been verified.

Protection of Refugees

The Basic Law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status in accordance with the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol, but the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. In practice the government claimed to provide protection against refoulement, the forced return of persons to a country where there is reason to believe they feared persecution. The Basic Law provides that "the state will grant political asylum, if so required by the public interest."

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

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

The UNHCR Representative Office to the GCC countries reported that as of December, the government permitted 151 Iraqi refugees at the Rafha refugee camp to reside in urban areas. As of December, 83 Iraqi refugees remained inside the camp. NGOs present in the camp included the Saudi Red Crescent and the International Islamic Relief Organization. According to a representative of the UNHCR, since 1991 the UNHCR has facilitated the resettlement of more than 25,000 Iraqi refugees.

During the year the UNHCR did not find any evidence of forcible repatriation. However, in September there were reports of the deportation of Chinese Muslim Uighurs allegedly residing illegally in the Jeddah area.

According to the NGO Refugees International, the Bidoon are not given passports. Also, citizenship is not granted to children of citizen women married to noncitizens. Palestinians, who number about 287,000 in country, mostly have legal residence status only. They are not assisted or formally recognized as refugees by the UN.

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

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

On September 23, a petition with 1,100 signatures was transmitted to the king seeking a repeal of the ban on women driving. According to HRW, the group circulating the petition received a warning against mounting any demonstrations. At year's end there was no official government reply.

Elections and Political Participation

Under the family monarchy system enshrined in the Basic Law, only a few members of the ruling family have a voice in the choice of leaders, the composition of the government or in changing the political system. In October 2006 the king issued the new succession law that amended the 1992 Basic Law and formalized the process by creating the Allegiance Commission that will select a king and crown prince upon the death or incapacitation of either. The Allegiance Commission is composed of the sons and grandsons of Abdulaziz bin Abd al-Rahman al-Faysal Al Sa'ud. This commission expands the role of the ruling family in the selection process. The government ruled on civil and religious matters within the limitations established by the Basic Law, religious law, tradition, and the need to maintain consensus among the ruling family and religious leaders.

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

Only male, nonmilitary citizens of at least 21 years of age were eligible to vote in the nationwide 2005 elections for 592 seats on 178 municipal advisory councils (half of the total seats). Women were not permitted either to vote or to stand for office. There were no independent election observers. Unofficial estimates were that between 10 and 15 percent of eligible voters actually voted. The king completed the formation of the councils in 2005 by appointing 592 men to fill the other half of the council seats.

The 1992 Basic Law also created the Consultative Council that reviews, votes on, and provides recommendations to the king on some legislation proposed by the ministries. The Consultative Council consists of 150 appointed male members to four year terms in 2005 and is divided into 11 committees. The council has been granted authority to initiate its own legislation, which is sent to the king for approval. In 2006 the council appointed six women as part-time consultants on matters of family and women's issues. The government generally accepted the council's proposed amendments. The council held hearings with some government officials to review the performance of their ministries; all government ministers were required to submit to hearings. Some but not all of these hearings are televised after the fact. The council has the power to request documents from government ministries. It has indirect and limited budget authority in that it must approve the spending priorities of different ministries. The council effectively blocked the imposition of new taxes.

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

Communication between citizens and the government traditionally has been expressed through client-patron relationships and by affinity groups such as tribes, families, and professional hierarchies. Ministers and district governors could be approached for discussion at a majlis, which were held on a weekly basis.

During the year and since 1992 various groups, including women and Shi'a, have submitted petitions calling for political reform. Since its establishment in 1996, the London-based Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) has claimed it advocates the peaceful overthrow of the royal family. The head of MIRA and host of Satellite Islah TV, Saad al-Fagih, is a supporter of terrorism and provided financial and material support to al Qa'ida and Usama bin Laden. Previously, MIRA and the London-based extremist Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR) had advocated overthrowing the monarchy by force. MIRA and the CDLR criticized the government, using the Internet and satellite radio stations. During the year MIRA continued to call for the overthrow of the government and called for gatherings in various mosques in the country through its Web site and radio and satellite TV broadcasts.

In August 2006 the Paris-based group Saudi Democratic Opposition Front (SDOF), announced its formation and called for the peaceful overthrow of the monarchy. It claimed a "desire for democracy" and an enhancement in liberties in society. The SDOF stated it would coordinate its activities with other opponents of the government, chiefly MIRA. The SDOF is led by Prince Talal Muhammad al-Rashid who has been exiled since 1980. He is the son of the last ruler of the Rashidi emirate, conquered by the al-Saud family in the early 20th century. During the year the SDOF was inactive aside from posting articles critical of the government and the religious establishment on its Web site.

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

Government Corruption and Transparency

The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators reflected that corruption was a problem and there was widespread

public perception of corruption on the part of some members of the royal family and the executive branch of the government. The absence of transparency in government accounts and in decision making encouraged this perception. There are no laws providing public access to government information. Information concerning specific instances, allegations regarding corruption, or government actions against corruption was not publicly available within the country. However, allegations such as those surrounding the British Aerospace-Al Yamamah arms deal were known to those with access to foreign media.

On February 19, the Council of Ministers approved a national strategy, including the establishment of the National Authority to Protect Honesty and Combat Corruption under the direct supervision of the king. The strategy's main goals are to root out corruption, promote accountability, create jobs, and increase wages. The king was widely credited with having reduced corruption in some industries. The awarding of major government contracts has become more transparent. Defense contractors report that over the past five years there has been a change in the bidding process, and there is now an open bidding process for defense contracts.

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

The government viewed its interpretation of Islamic law as the only necessary guide to protect human rights. The MOI licenses and monitors compliance with rules and regulations by NGOs, including professional associations, charities, and social organizations. The two licensed domestic human rights institutions, the governmental HRC and the NSHR operated in a restricted ambit, reliant on government support. The one nonlicensed human rights group, HRFS, operated without legal status. On September 11, according to HRW, a group of citizens presented a second request, following-up an initial one in 2003, to the minister of social affairs to register the "National Saudi Committee of Human Rights." By year's end there was no reply.

The NSHR, which was endowed by King Fahd, continued to receive requests for assistance and complaints about the government. Since its creation in 2004, the NSHR has received approximately 8,568 complaints. Most of its members are academics, and two of its former members are ministers (social affairs, and education). Ten of its 41 members were women. The NSHR established offices in Jeddah, Dammam, Riyadh, and Jizan. The NSHR attempted to resolve cases by working with government agencies. The NSHR reported that government officials cooperated with requests for information and action to resolve complaints. According to an Arab News November 28 article, the fact that the NSHR has a women's section--and the HRC does not--resulted in the NSHR receiving more cases relating to family violence than the HRC. For example, in the previous two years the HRC only received 10-15 cases of that nature, according to HRC President Turki al-Sudairi.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

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

Women

Shari'a prohibits abuse and violence against all innocent persons, including women. However, domestic violence, gender discrimination, and severe restrictions on women's freedom of movement remained serious problems.

Shari'a also criminalizes rape, which is punishable by death, although this punishment did not extend to spousal rape. Statistics on incidents of rape and convictions were not available. Cases of rape were difficult to document in view of the associated social stigma against the victims; however, rape against women and boys and domestic violence against women remained serious problems. The majority of rape cases were never reported because victims face stringent societal reprisal, often being deemed unfit for marriage or even punished as a result of having been raped.

In Qatif, the sentencing of the female victim of rape to lashing provided an example of discrimination and acceptance of societal abuse of women. There were no laws specifically outlawing domestic violence. According the Ministry of Social Affairs, more than 550 domestic violence cases were reported during the year. The Riyadh Central Hospital counted 102 abuse cases of women from January to August. On November 19, *Al Madina* newspaper reported that in the previous two years, there were 325 reported cases of domestic violence against women in the Mecca region. According to the NSHR, women continued to suffer largely unreported abuse at the hands of their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Violence against women was widely tolerated by the community. Abusers were rarely prosecuted, and investigations were rarely carried out for complaints of violent attacks, rape, murders, or suicides of women. Women who reported rape faced imprisonment and accusations of adultery.

On July 11, in response to the lack of services for the victims of domestic violence, the king issued a royal decree establishing the National Family Safety program hosted by King Abdulaziz Medical City National Guard, including a

national campaign to fight family violence and a social survey of the reality of family violence and child abuse. Media reports highlighted the lack of effectiveness of Ministry of Social Affairs and NSHR programs to address domestic violence, including shelters, because of the lack of qualified personnel and ineffective mechanisms to ensure protection. The National Guard Hospital also launched a free hot line for complaints of family violence.

In addition, local print media in the Mecca region reported in October 2006 that despite the Ministry of Social Affairs' approval for establishing the "General Department for Social Protection," abuse victims complained of ineffectiveness and a lack of "qualified personnel".

In November the national newspaper *Okaz* reported an incident in which two women in Taif were brutally beaten by their husbands; the article called for the establishment of an NSHR branch in Taif.

Violence or sexual abuse against female domestic migrant workers was common. However, fewer than 20 cases were reported in the press during the past year. Roughly 500 domestic workers sought shelter at their respective embassies, although not all for sexual abuse. Foreign embassies received many reports that employers abused foreign women working as domestic servants. Some embassies with large domestic servant populations maintained safe houses for citizens fleeing work situations that included forced confinement, withholding of food, and nonpayment of salaries, beating, physical abuse, and rape. Female employers were also often accused of committing many abuses, such as forced confinement, withholding of food, nonpayment of salaries, and beating the domestic workers.

An Indonesian domestic servant alleged that she was raped by her employer's 17-year-old son and became pregnant by him. She ran away a few weeks later to the Indonesian Embassy which helped her file a case. The authorities detained the accused several days for questioning, then released him and closed the case. She has since given birth and requested that a DNA test be conducted to confirm paternity of her child in order to bolster the case against her alleged attacker.

In August two Indonesian maids died and two others were severely injured after their sponsors beat them with ropes, power cables, handcuffs, canes, and feet. The survivors were detained by authorities following their release from the hospital on charges of sorcery, but they were released to the custody of the Indonesian Embassy in October. Their attackers remained in police custody pending investigation.

Prostitution is illegal. However, some women (and men), primarily noncitizens, reportedly engaged in prostitution. The extent of prostitution was not known. Trafficking of women and children for commercial sexual exploitation occurred.

Law and custom discriminated against women. There were no women serving on the Shura Council. However, there were women appointed to consult with the Shura Council. Nevertheless, women--particularly in villages and rural areas--continued to face discrimination and remained uninformed of their rights under Shari'a. Although they have the right to own property and are entitled to financial support from husbands or male relatives, women have few political or social rights and were not treated as equal members of society. In accordance with the religious establishment's interpretation of Shari'a, women were prohibited from marrying non-Muslims, but men were permitted to marry Christians and Jews.

There were no legally recognized human rights groups focusing specifically on women's rights. "The Association for the Protection and Defense of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia" was established during the year. The group circulated petitions by e-mail and on Web sites seeking the right of women to drive. NSHR also addressed various women's rights issues.

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

All women, including noncitizen spouses of citizen men, and children required the permission of a male citizen to receive an exit visa to travel.

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

Women were also subject to discrimination under Shari'a as interpreted by the government, which stipulates daughters receive half the inheritance awarded to their brothers. While Shari'a provides women with a basis to own and dispose of property independently, women were often constrained from asserting such rights because of various legal and societal barriers, especially regarding employment and freedom of movement. In a Shari'a court, the testimony of one man equals that of two women.

Divorce laws also discriminated against women. For example, women had to demonstrate legally specified grounds for divorce, but men may divorce without giving cause. In doing so, men were required to immediately pay an amount of

money agreed upon at the time of the marriage, which serves as a one-time alimony payment. Women who demonstrate legal grounds for divorce also were entitled to this alimony. Some women claimed their husbands refused to sign the final divorce papers, leaving them in a state of limbo, unable to travel, obtain a business license, attend a university or college, or seek hospital care. If divorced or widowed, a Muslim woman normally may keep her children until they attain a specified age: seven years for boys and nine years for girls. Custody of children over these ages was awarded to the divorced husband or the deceased husband's family. Numerous divorced foreign women continued to be prevented by their former husbands from visiting their children after divorce.

Women had access to free but segregated education through the university level. They constituted more than 58 percent of all university students but cannot study architecture, civil engineering, or any vocational training, such as automechanics. Approximately 5 to 7 percent of government scholarships for studying overseas were given to women. Men may study overseas; the law provides that women may do so only if accompanied by a spouse or male guardian or the family provides written permission. The government paid the fees for a male guardian (or in some cases an older female guardian) to accompany female students on scholarships.

Most employment opportunities for women were in education and health care. During the year, women's participation in the teaching, nursing and care-provider professions increased.

Despite limited educational opportunities in many professional fields, some female citizens were able to study abroad and returned to work in professions such as architecture and journalism. Many foreign women worked as domestic servants and nurses.

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

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

In hospital settings and in the energy industry, women and men worked together, and in some instances women supervised male employees. The 2005 labor law expanded the right of women to maternity leave and required employers to provide child care if they employed 50 or more female employees.

Children

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

Abuse of children was a problem, although it was difficult to gauge its prevalence since the government kept no national statistics on child abuse. Although in general the culture greatly prizes children, studies by doctors indicated that severe abuse and neglect of children appeared to be more widespread than previously reported.

At least three NGOs, one in Riyadh, one in Qasim, and one in Jeddah, ran shelters for women and children. According to press reports, in the previous two years there have been 196 reported cases of domestic violence against children under 15 in the greater Mecca region.

In November the chairman of the HRC stated publicly that some foreign children, brought into the country during the Hajj pilgrimage, were subjected to exploitation in prostitution.

Trafficking in Persons

The law does not prohibit all forms of trafficking in persons, but penalizes forced labor through Articles 229-242 of the Labor Law. Due to the long time required to resolve criminal cases, the majority of cases involving trafficking were settled out of court by mediation and settlements. Some criminal prosecutions of abusive employers are publicized by the media. Regulations for implementing the labor law were issued, but domestic laborers remained unprotected.

The country was a destination for workers from Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Vietnam, Kenya, Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. Some foreign workers were subjected to conditions that constituted involuntary servitude, including nonpayment of wages, debt bondage, withholding of passports, other restrictions on movement, and physical or psychological intimidation. Domestic employees were especially vulnerable to abuse. Women from Yemen, Morocco, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Tajikistan were also trafficked to the country for commercial sexual exploitation. Others were reportedly kidnapped and forced into prostitution after running away from abusive employers. In addition, the country is also a destination for children from Niger, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Chad, and Sudan for forced labor as beggars and street vendors. Many of the large embassies maintained unofficial (unlicensed) safe houses.

In July the Philippines, Indonesian, and Sri Lankan Embassies housed approximately 500 abused domestic workers. However, as of September the number decreased from 500 to 200 workers.

The government's measures to protect trafficking victims included a public awareness campaign and strengthened cooperation with countries of origin such as Yemen and with NGOs such as UNICEF. However, the problem remained significant. Due to a lack of victim identification procedures in deportation centers and police stations, many victims of trafficking reportedly were arrested and deported rather than afforded sensitive protection services. Some victims were protected at one of three shelters run by the Ministry of Social Affairs operating in Riyadh, Dammam, and Jeddah. Others feared arrest or deportation due to their status as runaways (technically illegally in the country) or as prostitutes; as such, most victims fled directly to their respective embassies to await repatriation rather than approach the government. The government assisted some domestic worker trafficking victims with shelter, access to legal and medical services, and temporary residency status, including temporary relief from deportation. The government did not provide information about whether protection services were afforded to victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

On April 12, the Indonesian Embassy reported that almost 400 women sought refuge from their employers. The embassy provided 284 women with shelter and transferred another 100 to the embassy's headquarters.

Trafficking victims were treated at public hospitals. Employers often illegally retained the passports of foreign laborers, including domestic workers, sometimes resulting in forced labor. Most victims settled their cases out of court due to the length of time it takes to receive a judgment and a perception of judicial bias against noncitizens.

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

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

Persons with Disabilities

There is no legislation that mandates public accessibility; however, newer commercial buildings often included such access, as did some newer government buildings. The provision of government social services increasingly brought persons with disabilities into the public mainstream. The law provides hiring quotas for persons with disabilities. The government and private charitable organizations cooperated in education, employment, and other services for persons with disabilities.

Foreign criminal rings reportedly imported children with disabilities for the purpose of forced begging. According to Ministry of Social Affairs, there were numerous government-sponsored centers for persons with disabilities, including organizations for children with Down syndrome and autism. Disabled persons, however, were still hidden away from society. Police generally transported persons with mental disabilities found wandering alone in public to their families or a hospital.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Although racial discrimination is illegal, there was substantial societal prejudice based on ethnic or national origin. Foreign workers from Africa and Asia were subject to various forms of formal and informal discrimination and had the most difficulty in obtaining justice for their grievances. For example, some bilateral agreements governed pay, benefits, and work conditions. Consequently, pay scales for identical or similar labor or professional services were set by nationality such that two similarly qualified and experienced foreign nationals performing the same employment duties received varied compensation based on their nationalities.

Throughout the year, the media reported on married couples forced to divorce by family members because either the husband or wife was from "inappropriate lineage," i.e., a nontribal family or from an inferior tribe. For example, claiming Mansour al-Timani, the husband of Fatima, had lied about his tribal lineage, the half-brothers of Fatima al-Timani successfully filed for the divorce of their sister and her husband. Fatima and the couple's son spent 7 months living in a women's shelter. In July 2006 she chose imprisonment rather than living with her half brothers or in a shelter. After the divorce, prison officials forbade her husband from visiting her because the court had voided their marriage. In September

NSHR sent a letter to the Royal Court requesting a review of the case; at year's end the case had not been reviewed.

Collectively known as Bidoons ("without" in Arabic), these native-born residents lack citizenship. The reasons are diverse: due to an ancestor's failure to obtain nationality, including descendants of nomadic tribes who were not counted among the native tribes during the reign of the country's founder, King Abdulaziz; descendants of foreign-born fathers who arrived before citizenship was institutionalized; and rural migrants whose parents failed to register their births. Bidoon were denied employment and educational opportunities because of their lack of citizenship, and have limited ability to travel. Bidoons are among the poorest residents of the country because of their marginalized status.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

During the year there were reports that some Shi'a activist writers and other public figures were banned from traveling and the government had confiscated their passports.

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

There were reports of discrimination, physical violence, and harassment toward homosexuals. In October a court in al-Baha Province sentenced two men to 7,000 lashes each for engaging in sexual intercourse with other men. According to AI, the two men have reportedly received part of their sentence.

According to press reports, on March 19, police arrested 17 men in Dammam at a party in which men dressed as women. The men, locally known to be homosexuals, were arrested in a private apartment after a neighbor contacted officials due to loud noise.

At year's end there was no further information on men arrested in August and November 2006. In August 2006 the media reported that 250 young men were detained and subsequently 20 were arrested at a suspected "gay wedding" in Jizan. In November 2006 the media reported that police arrested five men for preparing to stage a beauty contest for homosexual men. The five men had previously been arrested in May for the same offense. The media also reported that several months before this incident, 92 men had been arrested at a gay party in Al-Qatif for wearing women's clothes, make-up, and wigs. At year's end none of these men had been sentenced.

The Ministry of Health's 2006 data reported a total of 11,520 HIV cases in the country, (2,658 cases of citizens and 8,852 noncitizens.) Of the total number infected, 1390 were cases reported in 2006, and 79.5 percent were between the ages of 15 and 49, 6.4 percent were younger.

In September 2006 the Ministry of Social Welfare approved the establishment of the Saudi Society for AIDS Patients in Jeddah to coordinate with government agencies and to provide services to patients. According to the ministry, some of the services included educating employers on the safety of hiring HIV-positive individuals as well as providing counsel to married couples in which a spouse has HIV/AIDS.

Incitement to Acts of Discrimination

During the year the government reported that the November 2006 multi-year project to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to promote tolerance and remove content disparaging religions other than Islam was underway. While some progress has been made in this regard, specifically regarding textbooks, there were intolerant statements toward religious groups that remained at year's end.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The Basic Law does not address freedom of association. The government prohibits the establishment of labor unions. Since 2001, the government has authorized the establishment of citizen-only labor committees in local companies including factories with more than 100 employees; however, at year's end there were 15 labor committees.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

Neither the 1992 Basic Law nor the 2005 Labor Law provide for collective bargaining. Foreign workers comprised approximately 88 percent of the work force in the private sector. The government issued implementing regulations for the September 2005 labor law. Domestic laborers were not protected under the country's labor law.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor; however, some foreign workers were subjected to conditions that constituted involuntary servitude, including nonpayment of wages, debt bondage, physical or psychological intimidation, and abuse. The law prohibits employers from retaining foreign employees' passports without the employees' consent. This law was neither well known nor enforced, so it was frequently violated. In practice employers often illegally retained passports of foreign laborers, including domestic workers, which sometimes resulted in forced labor, especially in remote areas where workers were unable to leave their places of work and could not legally travel without an identity card. In addition some sponsors prevented foreign workers from obtaining exit visas to compel them to sign a new work contract or to drop salary or benefits claims against their employer. Finally, some sponsors refused to provide foreign workers with a "letter of no objection" that would allow them to be employed by another sponsor.

There were many reports of employers who refused to pay workers several months, or even years, of accumulated salary or other promised benefits. Unlike domestic servants who are not protected by labor laws, some foreign workers turned to labor courts, which were generally regarded as fair and regularly ruled in favor of the workers; however, they sometimes took many months to reach a final appellate ruling. For example, Anista Marie, a Sri Lankan domestic servant, alleged in August that she had not been paid her \$134 (500 riyals) a month salary since 1999. With the assistance of the Sri Lankan Embassy, she reached a written settlement with her employer for \$5,334 (20,000 riyals). She gave the Sri Lankan Embassy power of attorney to press charges against her employer. Her employer paid \$2,267 (8,500 riyals) in cash and agreed to pay the balance in monthly installments of \$267 (1,000 riyals) to Anista Marie, she since returned to Sri Lanka where she will receive her monthly payments.

In another case, Girlie Malika Fernando, a Sri Lankan domestic servant, alleged that her employer failed to pay her salary for 13 years. The manager of the government-run Welfare Center for Stranded Housemaids, where Fernando lived for more than a year, unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate a settlement with her employer's family after her employer died. Fernando returned to Sri Lanka in October after Riyadh Governor Prince Salman gave her \$15,573 (58,400 riyals).

Foreign workers had access to labor courts, which regularly ruled in favor of the workers, but sometimes took many months, or even years, to reach a final appellate ruling. Existing regulations allow noncitizen workers engaged in a court case against their employers to legally work, provided they secure a new sponsor willing to accept financial liability for any counterclaims by the previous employer. These provisions made it difficult to secure potential sponsors and placed a significant burden on the worker. Some employers succeeded in forcing workers to withdraw their claims by delaying cases until the worker's funds were exhausted.

The Ministry of Labor's department for protection of foreign workers addresses abuse and exploitation of foreign workers (such as sexual harassment, mistreatment, and nonpayment of salaries). Workers may also submit complaints and seek help from the 37 labor ministry offices throughout the country. The department banned individuals and companies who mistreated foreign workers from sponsoring such workers for five years. Employers with repeated violations are banned indefinitely.

The law does not specifically prohibit forced or compulsory labor by children, and there were a few reports that it occurred.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

Child labor did not appear to be a problem among citizens, but children from Niger, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Chad, and Sudan were forced into child begging rings, street vending, and possibly family businesses. The government implemented a regulation requiring that all camel jockeys be at least 18 years of age, and there were indications it was enforced.

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

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

In general children played a minimal role in the work force.

Child beggars were reportedly often noncitizens who had been trafficked into the country for that purpose or were pilgrimage overstayers. The social affairs ministry maintained special offices in both Mecca and Medina to combat the

growing problem of child beggars.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

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

There were many difficult situations for foreign workers. For example, in March an Indonesian domestic worker fled from her employers, alleging severe physical abuse. Similarly, another Indonesian domestic worker fled her employers in March after 10 years' of uncompensated work and confinement to the house. A Sri Lankan maid was rescued in September after enduring 10 years of forced labor in Riyadh; she received only \$7500 (20,000 SR) in back wages and no criminal charges were lodged against her sponsors. On August 8, a family reportedly beat four Indonesian maids for allegedly practicing black magic on a teenage son. Two maids died in the attack and the other two were seriously injured. The victims' seven attackers remain in police custody pending investigation.

Labor regulations establish a 48-hour work week at regular pay and allow employers to require up to 12 additional hours of overtime at time-and-a-half pay. The labor law provides for a 24-hour rest period, normally on Fridays, although the employer may grant it on another day. The average wage for citizens generally provided a decent standard of living for the worker and family.

Sources produced varying estimates of the actual rate of citizen unemployment with different government agencies reporting between 5 and 9.6 percent and business leaders stating as high as 30 percent. This estimate did not include women, who were prohibited from working in the majority of business sectors and positions.

Approximately 80 percent of all working citizens worked directly for the government. Nearly all citizens worked indirectly for the government in parastatal companies such as Saudi Arabian Airlines and Saudi Aramco. According to the government, citizen workers accounted for only 12 percent, (fewer than 800,000) of the approximately 6.76 million persons employed in the private sector; foreign nationals held the remaining 88 percent of the jobs.

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

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

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

The government continued a campaign to remove illegal aliens by widely publicizing the enforcement of existing laws against both the illegal aliens and the citizens employing or sponsoring them.

Many foreign workers were not able to exercise their right to remove themselves from dangerous situations.

