



United Arab Emirates

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

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The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven semi-autonomous emirates with a resident population of 4.2 million, of which approximately 20 percent (850,000) are citizens. The seven emirate rulers constitute the Federal Supreme Council, the highest legislative and executive body. The council selects a president and a vice president from its membership, and the president appoints the prime minister and cabinet. In 2004 the council selected Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, ruler of Abu Dhabi Emirate, as head of state for a five-year term. By tradition, the emirates are generally under patriarchal rule with political allegiance defined in terms of loyalty to tribal leaders, to leaders of the individual emirates, and to leaders of the federation. There are no democratically elected legislative institutions or political parties. There are no general elections. Citizens express their concerns directly to their leaders through traditional, consultative mechanisms such as the open "majlis" (council). A consultative body, the Federal National Council (FNC), consists of 40 advisors, 20 of whom a 6,689-member appointed electoral college elected in December 2006. The civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces.

Citizens did not have the right to change their government. In some cases, security forces reportedly employed flogging as judicially sanctioned punishment. Arbitrary detention and incommunicado detention remained problems. The judiciary lacked full independence. The government restricted civil liberties, including freedoms of speech, press (including the Internet), assembly, association, and religion. There were limited reports of corruption, and the government lacked transparency. Domestic abuse of women remained a problem, and there were allegations that it was sometimes enabled by police. Trafficking in women and children and legal and societal discrimination against women and noncitizens also remained problems. The government severely restricted workers' rights, and the abuse of foreign domestic servants remained a problem.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

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

The constitution prohibits torture, and no reports of such practices existed. However, courts applying Shari'a (Islamic law) sometimes imposed flogging sentences on Muslims and non-Muslims as punishment for adultery, prostitution, consensual premarital sex, pregnancy outside of marriage, defamation of character, and drug or alcohol abuse. Authorities used canes to administer floggings, which left substantial bruising, welts, and open wounds on the recipients' bodies.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions varied widely from emirate to emirate. Some prisons were overcrowded, particularly in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Dubai continued to maintain a new 6,000 bed prison facility opened in May 2006, which reportedly housed fewer than 3,000 prisoners at any given time during the year. Noncitizens constituted 75 percent of all prisoners.

Conditions for women were equal to or slightly better than those for men. Prisoners convicted on national security grounds

were held separately from the general populace. Conditions in these special sections were not significantly different from other parts of the prisons. There were credible reports that government officials discriminated against prisoners with HIV by not granting commuted sentences or parole that other prisoners with similar records received.

Police in Dubai and Abu Dhabi stated that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the International Committee of the Red Cross have access to observe prison conditions if requested.

During the year the NGO Emirates Human Rights Association (EHRA) visited prison and detention facilities in the country. On January 18, the EHRA visited the Ras Al-Khaimah male central detention facility. On February 5, EHRA visited Ras Al-Khaimah female central detention facility. On February 19, EHRA visited the Sharjah Detention Facilities Directorate, and also in February EHRA visited the Dubai detention facilities. On April 24, EHRA visited the Abu Dhabi detention facilities. In March EHRA issued a report on prison conditions detailing cases of persons detained for up to three years without a trial date due to overcrowding, particularly in Ras Al-Khaima, Sharjah, and Dubai facilities.

On September 25, Dubai police opened a Human Rights Department branch in Dubai's central detention center, Al-Aweer Detention Facility. It served to monitor the welfare of prisoners and provide humanitarian assistance to prisoners and their families.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention; however, there were reports that the government held persons in official custody without charge or a preliminary judicial hearing. Current law permits indefinite, routine, incommunicado detention without appeal. Under this procedure, the detainee may only contact his attorney.

In July state security officials returned the passport of human rights activist, attorney, and former president of the Jurists Association Mohamed Abdullah Al-Roken. In August 2006 security officials detained and questioned Al-Roken about his human rights activities and public lectures for 72 hours in Dubai before releasing him without charge.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The federal Ministry of Interior (MOI) oversees Police General Directorates in each of the seven emirates; however, each emirate, under its corresponding Police General Directorate, maintained its own police force and supervised the police stations therein. While all emirate police forces theoretically were branches of the ministry, in practice they operated with considerable autonomy and varying degrees of efficiency. Police stations received complaints from the public, made arrests, and forwarded most cases to the public prosecutor. Cases were then transferred to the courts. In cases involving foreign defendants, especially for crimes of moral turpitude, authorities often summarily deported the defendants. All cases were filed with MOI. While reported incidents of police corruption were uncommon, the ministry intervened several times in criminal cases to ensure local police were compliant with federal law and policy. There were no reports of impunity.

Arrest and Detention

The law prohibits arrest or search without probable cause; however, incidents occurred in practice. There were credible reports that security forces failed to obtain warrants in some cases.

Under the Criminal Procedures Code, police are directed to report arrests to public prosecutors within 48 hours, who then must determine within the next 24 hours whether to charge, release, or further detain the suspect. In practice this 24-hour time limit was not always met. Public prosecutors may order detainees to be held up to 21 days without charge. In cases of felonies or misdemeanors punishable by imprisonment, authorities must obtain court orders after 21 days for additional detention. Courts may not grant an extension of more than 30 days of detention without charge; however, judges may continue to renew 30-day extensions indefinitely and without charge. The 2004 antiterrorism law allows public prosecutors to hold suspects in terrorism-related cases without charge for six months. Once a suspect is charged, terrorism cases are handled by the Supreme Court, which may extend the detention period indefinitely.

There is no formal system of bail; however, authorities can temporarily release detainees who deposit money, a passport, or an unsecured personal guarantee statement signed by a third party. Those arrested on nonsecurity charges were generally promptly allowed to telephone third parties and to have access to family members while in detention. Defendants in cases involving loss of life, including involuntary manslaughter, can be denied release in accordance with the law. Release usually is permitted after a payment of compensation to the victims' families, commonly called "diya" or "blood money," which is a form of financial penalty imposed on defendants in criminal cases involving a death.

A defendant is entitled to an attorney only after the police have completed their investigation. As a result, the prosecutor general may grant police approval to question accused persons sometimes for days or weeks without benefit of legal counsel.

Diplomatic missions in the country continued to report that authorities often failed to provide consular notification when their citizens were detained or arrested.

Amnesty

On religious and national holidays the rulers of the individual emirates regularly pardon and pay the debts of many prisoners. According to press reports, rulers pardoned at least 2,254 prisoners and paid over \$2.5 million (9 million dirhams) in debts during the year. The government deported most foreign nationals who were pardoned.

Between June 3 and November 3, the government granted a three-month grace period to illegal expatriate workers and their employers to adjust their status or leave the country without penalty. According to government statistics, 341,958 persons took advantage of the amnesty.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, in practice it was not independent, as decisions were subject to review by the political leadership. The judiciary was composed largely of contracted foreign nationals potentially subject to deportation. Federal law prohibits women from serving in the judiciary; however, on September 9, the president, in his capacity as Abu Dhabi ruler, appointed two women to serve as public prosecutors in Abu Dhabi.

Authorities generally brought criminal defendants to trial within two to three months, with the exception of drug-related cases, which reportedly often took more than six months to go to trial. Trials can last more than a year, depending on the seriousness of the charges, number of witnesses, and availability of judges.

By tradition, the local rulers' offices, or "diwans," maintained the practice of reviewing many types of criminal and civil offenses before cases were referred to prosecutors, reviewing sentences passed by judges, returning cases to the court on appeal, and approving the release of every prisoner whose sentence has been completed. The diwans' involvement, usually when cases involve parties from two different emirates or a citizen and noncitizen, can lead to lengthy delays prior to and following the judicial process, including by lengthening time served in prison. The diwan's decision in any court case is considered final, and in the case of disagreement between a judge and diwan (i.e. the local ruler), the diwan's decision prevails. Because diwans report to the minister of the interior, there is often no functional separation between the executive and judicial branches.

There is a dual court system. Shari'a courts adjudicate criminal and family law matters based on each emirate's interpretation of Shari'a. Civil courts adjudicate civil law matters and generally are part of the federal system, except in the Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Ras al-Khaimah emirates. They were accountable to the Federal Supreme Court, which has the power of judicial review as well as original jurisdiction in disputes between emirates or between the federal government and individual emirates. The emirates of Dubai and Ras al-Khaimah have their own local and appellate courts, which have jurisdiction over matters within their territories that the constitution and federal legislation do not specifically reserve for the federal system. The emirates of Dubai and Ras al-Khaimah did not refer cases in their courts to the federal Supreme Court for judicial review, although they maintained a liaison with the federal Ministry of Justice. In December 2006 the president, in his capacity as ruler of Abu Dhabi, issued a law to restructure the judicial department in Abu Dhabi to become independent from the federal Ministry of Justice, similar to Dubai and Ras Al Khaimah courts.

Each emirate administered Shari'a courts. In some emirates these courts considered all types of civil and commercial cases as well as criminal cases and family matters. They acted in accordance with their interpretation of Shari'a but were required to answer to the federal Supreme Court, with the exception of the emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Ras al-Khaimah. In criminal cases Shari'a was applied first, and if evidence required by Shari'a was found insufficient, the penal code was used. Dubai had a special Shi'a council to act on matters pertaining to Shi'a family law.

Approximately 50 percent of federal judges were noncitizen Arabs, whose mandates were subject to periodic renewal by the government. In contrast, judicial positions held by citizens were permanent and subject to termination only for specific reasons set out in the Judicial Authority Law. The percentage of citizens serving as public prosecutors and judges, particularly at the federal level, continued to increase. Although each emirate varied, approximately 85 percent of public prosecutors were citizens. There were 101 citizen prosecutors in the country and 21 noncitizen prosecutors.

Trial Procedures

The constitution does not provide accused persons the right to a timely trial but does provide the right to a fair, public trial. Juries are not used.

Defendants have a limited right to legal counsel. Under the Criminal Procedures Code, the defendant has a right to request government-provided counsel in all cases involving a capital crime or possible life imprisonment, regardless of whether the defendant is financially able to hire counsel. The government may provide counsel, at its discretion, to indigent defendants

charged with felonies punishable by imprisonment of three to 15 years. The Penal Procedures Law states that defense counsel may be present during any investigation but only at the prosecutor's discretion. Defense counsel was provided with access to relevant government-held evidence. Defendants and their attorneys can present witnesses and question witnesses against them.

Defendants were presumed innocent until proven guilty. Except for national security cases and cases deemed by the judge to be harmful to public morality, all trials were public. By law, all prosecutions were conducted in Arabic. The defendant had a procedural right to a translator. In some cases involving deportation of illegal residents, translation was provided only at sentencing.

Each court system has an appeals process. Death sentences may be appealed to the ruler of the emirate in which the offense is committed or to the president of the federation. In the case of murder, only the victim's family may commute a death sentence. The government normally negotiates with victims' families for the defendant to offer financial compensation, diya, in exchange for forgiveness and a commuted death sentence.

In cases in which a defendant is acquitted, the prosecutor may appeal the acquittal to a higher court. The higher court may receive additional evidence. An appellate court must reach unanimous agreement to overturn an acquittal.

Non-Muslims who are tried for criminal offenses in Shari'a courts can receive civil penalties at the discretion of the judge. Shari'a penalties imposed on non-Muslims can be overturned or modified by a higher court.

The military has its own court system. Military tribunals try only military personnel. National security cases are heard solely by the Supreme Court.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political detainees or prisoners; however, there were persons reportedly held incommunicado and without charge. It is unknown why they were detained. There were no updates in the cases of at least four such individuals whom some human rights groups claimed were political prisoners.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Access to courts for the purpose of seeking damages for, or cessation of, human rights violations was available. The civil courts, like all courts in the country, lacked full independence. There were also administrative remedies available for labor complaints. This was particularly common in cases of physical abuse of domestic workers.

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

The constitution prohibits entry into homes without the owner's permission, except when police present a warrant in accordance with the law; however, there were credible reports that security forces sometimes failed to obtain warrants. Officers' actions in searching premises were subject to review, and officers were liable to disciplinary action if their actions were judged to be irresponsible. During the year there were instances in which police officers failed to obtain warrants; these cases were transferred to the public prosecutor's office. Local custom and practices place a high value on privacy. A female police officer was required to be present during the search of a private home when male family members were absent.

Authorities did not commonly screen private correspondence; however, there have been reports of censorship of incoming international mail.

Family matters for Muslims were governed by the local Shari'a courts. Muslim women were forbidden to marry non-Muslims. In such cases, both parties can be arrested and tried and the couple is separated. However, Muslim men were free to marry all women "of the book," i.e., Muslim, Christian, and Jewish women.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press; however, the government restricted these rights in practice. The government drafts all Friday sermons in mosques and censors private association publications. Criticism of rulers was prohibited as are acts that may create or encourage social unrest. Journalists and editors practiced extensive self-censorship.

The Press and Publications Law covers all print and electronic media and book publishing. It governs content, requires that publications be licensed, and provides for prosecution of violations under the penal code. The law authorizes censorship of domestic and foreign publications before distribution and contains a list of proscribed subjects: criticism of the government, ruling families, and friendly governments, as well as other statements that threaten social stability. Government officials reportedly warned journalists when they published material deemed politically or culturally sensitive.

On September 25, Vice President and Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum ordered that journalists no longer be imprisoned for violating the Press and Publications Law. All other punishments for violations remained in force.

By law the National Media Council (NMC), appointed by the president, licenses all publications. The council was informed of the appointment of editors and was responsible for issuing press credentials to editors. According to the council and Dubai police officials, journalists were not given specific publishing instructions. However, journalists, many of whom were noncitizens, practiced extensive self-censorship regarding what issues they chose to cover. The ministry relied on editors' and journalists' discretion to refrain from publishing potentially problematic material.

Between February 14 and May 13, the NMC provided a three-month grace period to allow all media firms to adjust their legal status according to the Press and Publications Law.

In April three tabloid newspapers stopped printing and publishing because the NMC reportedly did not license the newspapers. According to the NMC, it never issued a decision to suspend or shut down newspapers, and the April closures were due to irregularities in their licensing status. According to the publisher of the three newspapers, Press Center and Art Publication, it chose to shut down and move its publication to another country.

On April 29, the Abu Dhabi Federal Court of First Instance fined an Arabic newspaper editor-in-chief \$5,450 (20,000 dirhams) for maligning two dignitaries by publishing an article on how their horse was stripped of an award for taking a banned substance.

Two of the country's newspapers, *Al-Ittihad* and *Al-Bayan*, were government-owned and affiliated. The privately-owned media was heavily influenced by the government. The country's largest Arabic language newspaper, *Al-Khaleej*, was privately owned but received government subsidies. The country's largest English language newspaper, *Gulf News*, was also privately owned. Arabic newspapers often relied on news agencies to quote official statements and decisions. The government-owned Emirates News Agency regularly provided material in English and Arabic that newspapers printed verbatim. Reporters from English newspapers often relied on different sources in publishing their stories, especially on trafficking and labor issues.

While self-censorship affected what was reported in the local media, foreign journalists and news organizations operating out of the Dubai Media Free Zone reported no restrictions on the content of print and broadcast material produced for use outside the country. Broadcast content within the Dubai Media Free Zone is regulated by the Free Zone Authority for Technology and Media under published guidelines entitled the "Code of Guidance." There were reports that some broadcast channels in the Media Free Zone broadcast songs and cellular short message service (SMS) messages described as "indecent" by government officials. Since March all free zones in the country were required to obtain written approval of the NMC before licensing any print or broadcast activities.

Except for those located in Dubai's Media Free Zone and foreign language media targeted to expatriates, most television and radio stations were government-owned and conformed to unpublished government reporting guidelines. Satellite receiving dishes were widespread and provided access to international broadcasts without apparent censorship. The NMC censors (previously under the MOI) reviewed all imported media and banned or censored before distribution material considered pornographic, excessively violent, derogatory to Islam, supportive of certain Israeli government positions, unduly critical of friendly countries, or critical of the government or ruling families. Publication of books was treated in the same manner.

Internet Freedom

The government restricted access to some Web sites on the Internet and monitored chat rooms, instant messaging services, and blogs. Individuals and groups generally engaged in peaceful expression of views via the Internet, including by e-mail, with few reports of government prosecution or punishment, although there was self-censorship apparent in many chat rooms and blogs.

On August 8, the Ras Al-Khaimah court sentenced the owner of the blog majan.net to one year in prison and a fine of \$19,000 (70,000 dirhams) and shut down the Web site when the administrator refused to delete critical material about a citizen official that a blog participant posted. The owner of the Web site appealed the sentence, and on September 12, the Ras Al-Khaimah court sentenced both the owner and the author of the blog to an additional five months each in prison. Both appealed the court decision, and both were released on bail on October 1 on instructions from the emirate's crown prince. The court had not provided a decision on the appeal at year's end.

According to the NGO the Initiative for an Open Arab Internet, Internet access was widely available. Etisalat, the country's only Internet service provider, reported in July that 60 percent of the country's population was connected through Etisalat. A proxy server blocked material deemed inconsistent with the religious, cultural, political and moral values of the country, including dating and matrimonial sites; gay and lesbian sites; sites concerning the Baha'i Faith; sites originating in Israel; and sites explaining how to circumvent the proxy server. The proxy server occasionally blocked broad categories of sites including many that did not meet the intended criteria. Etisalat populated its proxy server list of blocked sites primarily from lists of Web sites purchased from commercial companies, although individuals could also report offensive sites.

Etisalat denied having the authority to block any site and referred all complaints and suggestions to the NMC. However, there were reports that it blocked sites during the year. Internet filtering policy and appeals were regulated by the Telecom Regulatory Authority. Each blocked site provided an e-mail address and Web site through which a user could notify Etisalat if the site should not be blocked.

In July Etisalat blocked a social Web site, Orkut, for containing links to sexually explicit material. The Web site remained blocked at year's end. The sites Arabtimes.com and UAEprison.com, which were politically oriented and often critical of the government, remained blocked without explanation.

The 2006 Information and Privacy "cyber crime" Law explicitly criminalizes the use of the Internet to commit a wide variety of crimes. The law provides fines and prison terms for Internet users who violate political, social, and religious norms. In addition to criminalizing acts commonly associated with "cyber crimes," such as hacking, phishing, scams, and other forms of financial fraud, the law also provides penalties for using the Internet to oppose Islam, proselytize Muslims to join other religions, "abuse" a holy shrine or ritual of any religion, insult any religion, or incite someone to commit sin. The law criminalizes use of the Internet in transcending "family values" by publishing news or photos pertaining to a person's private life or family or by promoting a breach of public decency.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government restricted academic freedom and censored academic materials destined for schools. The government banned students from reading texts featuring sexuality or pictures of the human body.

By year's end the government permitted only one of the 15 intellectuals it banned from publishing and teaching in the country in 2000 to return to teaching and writing. This ban continued to inhibit open academic discussions of a political nature.

Presentation of, and participation in, cultural events were also restricted.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution provides for freedom of assembly and association; in practice the government did not respect these rights. Organized public gatherings require a government permit. No permits were given for organized public gatherings for political purposes. In practice the government did not regularly interfere with informal nonpolitical gatherings held without a government permit in public places, unless there were complaints.

Freedom of Assembly

During the year there were approximately 27 widely publicized, organized gatherings (primarily in Dubai) before the Ministry of Labor (MOL), in which more than 28,000 workers protested against unpaid wages and unsuitable working conditions. These gatherings occurred without prior government permission and generally without government interference.

Citizens normally confined their political discussions to the frequent informal gatherings, or *majlises*, held in private homes. The government did not permit public meetings or demonstrations for political purposes. There were citizens associations licensed by, and subsidized by, the government, that were able to organize for economic, religious, social, cultural, athletic, and other purposes.

Freedom of Association

Political organizations, political parties, and trade unions are illegal. All NGOs were required to register with the Ministry of Social Affairs, after which they receive subsidies from the government based on membership size. Approximately 100 domestic NGOs were registered with the ministry. However, despite the requirement, more than 20 unregistered local NGOs focused on nonpolitical topics and operated with little or no government interference.

The percentage of citizen membership in NGOs varied widely. All private associations, including children's clubs,

charitable groups, and hobby associations required approval and licensing by local, municipal, or emirate level governments. However, this requirement was enforced loosely in some emirates.

Private associations must follow the government's censorship guidelines and receive prior government approval before publishing any material. Participation by NGO members in any event outside the country is subsidized and directed by the government. Participants must obtain government permission before attending such events, even if they are not speakers.

c. Freedom of Religion

The constitution provides for freedom of religion in accordance with established customs, and the government generally respected this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions. The federal constitution declares that Islam is the official religion of the country. According to the 2001 census, 76 percent of the overall (including resident foreigners) population was Muslim, 9 percent was Christian, and 15 percent belonged to other religions.

The government controlled all Sunni and Shi'a mosques, prohibited the proselytizing of Muslims, and restricted freedom of assembly and association, thereby limiting the ability of religious groups without dedicated religious buildings to worship and conduct business. The government funded or subsidized approximately 95 percent of Sunni mosques and employed their Sunni imams. Approximately 5 percent of Sunni mosques were entirely private. Several prominent mosques had large private endowments. A committee of the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments drafted and distributed all Friday sermons to Sunni and Shi'a imams. The government monitors all sermons for political content and adherence to the scripted content.

The government supported a moderate interpretation of Islam; however, as the state religion, Islam was favored over other religions, and conversion to Islam was viewed favorably. All Sunni imams were employees of either individual emirate departments or of the General Authority for Islamic Affairs and Endowments. Dubai's department of Islamic affairs and endowments had approval authority over preachers in that emirate's private mosques.

The Shi'a minority, concentrated in the northern emirates, was free to worship and maintain its own mosques. All Shi'a mosques were considered private and received no funds from the government. The government did not appoint imams for Shi'a mosques, but it did monitor all sermons closely. Shi'a Muslims in Dubai can pursue Shi'a family law cases through a special Shi'a council rather than the Shari'a courts.

Individual emirates exercised considerable autonomy in religious matters. According to the General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments, there was no formalized method of granting official status to religious groups other than by granting them the use of land for the construction of a building. Land grant applications are filed at the local level but may include a letter from the general authority. Several non-Muslim groups have established and run houses of worship where they can practice their religion freely, although the local ruler owns the land. Groups that did not have their own buildings were limited in their ability to assemble for worship; they were required to use the facilities of other religious organizations or worship in private homes. The police or other security forces did not interfere with these gatherings.

Facilities for Christian congregations were far greater in number and size than those for other non-Muslim groups, which significantly outnumber the Christian population. There were at least 31 Christian churches in the country, and Christian primary and secondary schools operated in four emirates. There were two Hindu temples located in Dubai, one of which was co-located with a Sikh "gurudwara." There were no Buddhist temples; however, Buddhists, along with Hindus and Sikhs in cities without temples, conducted religious ceremonies in private homes without interference. Official permission must be obtained to use one of the two cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the large Hindu community in the country.

The government prohibited Muslims from converting to other religions. Under Shari'a the ultimate penalty for converting from Islam to another religion is death; however, the death penalty was rarely carried out in the country, and there have been no reports that it has been applied to any case of conversion. Although non-Muslims in the country were free to practice their religion, they were subject to criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and deportation if found proselytizing or distributing religious literature to Muslims. There were no specific laws against missionary activities, and there were no reports of authorities revoking residence permits of persons suspected of such activities. Missionaries have performed humanitarian work since before the country's independence in 1971. There was no restriction on proselytizing non-Muslims.

The country's sole Internet service provider, Etisalat, sometimes blocked Web sites containing religious information. These sites included information on the Baha'i Faith, Judaism, negative critiques of Islam, and testimonies of former Muslims who had converted to Christianity.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There was a small resident noncitizen Jewish population of unknown size. There were no synagogues. There were no reported acts of physical violence against or harassment of Jewish persons, however, anti-Semitism in the media was present in articles and editorial cartoons, which depicted negative images of Jews. These expressions occurred primarily in the government affiliated daily newspapers *Al-Ittihad* (government-owned), *Al-Bayan* (government-owned), and *Al-Khaleej* (progovernment, privately owned). The articles and cartoons appeared without government response.

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 law provides for freedom of movement or relocation within the country, and the government generally respected these rights in practice.

Unrestricted foreign travel and immigration was permitted for male citizens, except those involved in legal disputes under adjudication. Custom dictates that a husband can bar his wife, minor children, and adult unmarried daughters from leaving the country by taking custody of their passports. However, there was no enforcement of this custom at exit points unless there was a court order barring an individual from traveling. All citizens have the right to return to the country.

The constitution prohibits forced exile, and there were no reported cases during the year.

The government may revoke naturalized citizens' passports and citizenship status for criminal or politically provocative actions, as these citizens were not of the country's original tribal groups. However, such revocations were rare, and there were no reports of such occurrences during the year.

The widespread practice of employers forcing foreign national employees to surrender their passports as a condition of employment remained a serious problem. A 2003 ban on this practice was generally not enforced. This practice prevented international travel or repatriation by foreign national employees without their employers' consent, and it especially affected employees in the resolution of employment disputes. Citizens were not restricted in seeking or changing employment. However, laborers are not permitted to change employers without first leaving the country for six months, unless the former employer agrees to waive the requirement. If the employer does not waive the requirement, the employee can take the matter to the disputes section at the MOL.

Protection of Refugees

The government did not grant refugee status or asylum. The 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, and the government has not established a system for providing protection to refugees. The government did not provide protection against refoulement, the return of persons to a country where there is reason to believe they feared persecution.

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) on a humanitarian basis but did not grant refugee status or asylum. Refugees generally were required to petition for settlement in third countries. In the past the government detained some persons seeking refugee status, particularly non-Arabs, while they awaited resettlement in third countries.

Stateless Persons

According to the EHRA and the UNHCR, there were at least 20,000 stateless residents who either were without citizenship or had no proof of citizenship for any country. Many such persons have lived in the country without citizenship for decades. Many stateless residents originally were from Iran, South Asia, and Zanzibar and entered the country illegally through the northern emirates ports to seek employment. Other stateless residents included Bedouins and their descendants, who were unable to prove they originated in the country.

Children born to male citizens acquire citizenship at birth. The same right does not extend to children of female citizens married to noncitizens; however, female citizens under these circumstances can apply to the Ministry of Presidential Affairs for citizenship for their children. In such cases, passports are generally issued and citizenship is generally received, although there is no formal procedure for naturalization. Foreign women may receive citizenship through marriage to a citizen after 10 years of marriage, and anyone may receive a passport by presidential fiat.

On October 10, the government completed procedures to naturalize 1,294 persons determined eligible through a national program initiated in October 2006 to regularize the status of the stateless. In order to be eligible for citizenship, individuals had to be resident in the country at least since the federation's establishment on December 2, 1971; not conceal any information or documentation that might reflect previous nationality; and be good citizens, including no prior criminal acts. The government continued to accept new applications at year's end. Although many applied for citizenship, some stateless persons did not submit applications for naturalization out of fear of deportation.

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

The law does not provide citizens the right to change their government peacefully or freely change the laws that govern them. There were no democratic general elections or institutions, and citizens did not have the right to form political parties.

In December 2006 an appointed electorate elected one-half of the 40-seat FNC, a consultative body without a legislative mandate. Federal executive and legislative power is in the hands of the Federal Supreme Council, a body composed of the hereditary rulers of the seven emirates that elects from its members the country's president and vice president. Decisions at the federal level generally were made by consensus among the rulers, their families, and other leading families.

Elections and Political Participation

In 2004 the seven-member Federal Supreme Council elected Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan as head of state for a five-year term.

On February 12, after a recession period of over a year-and-a-half without sessions, the FNC began its first bi-weekly session, following the December 2006 partial elections of 20 of its members by a small appointed electorate. In September 2006 the electoral college was established and consisted of 6,689 members, including 1,189 women. FNC seats were drawn from each emirate in proportion to the population. The emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai each have eight seats; the emirates of Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah have six; and the smaller emirates of Ajman, Umm Al Qaiwain, and Fujairah each have four. Each FNC member serves a term of two years. The FNC has no legislative authority but generally reviews all federal draft laws and decrees before they are officially adopted by the Federal Supreme Council. Legislation originates in the cabinet, and the FNC does not have the power to draft or reject legislation. It can, however, send legislation back to the cabinet for amendment. The FNC also has the authority to question any government minister.

The ruling families, in consultation with other prominent tribal figures, choose new emirate rulers.

The percentage of women in senior government or business positions increased during the year to 66 percent in the government sector. The Federal Judicial Authority Law prohibited women from working as judges or public prosecutors. In 2006 women underwent public prosecution training, and on September 9, the president, in his capacity as Abu Dhabi ruler, appointed two women to serve as public prosecutors in Abu Dhabi. In August 2006 three women were appointed to senior administrative positions in Dubai's public prosecutor's office. In December 2006 one woman was elected to the FNC. There are nine women total in the FNC; one of them was elected, while the other eight were appointed. During the year 37 women constituted 10 percent of the country's 362 diplomatic corps members. In Sharjah seven women served on the 40-seat Consultative Council, and two women served as directors of local departments. In the other emirates there were no women in non-federal senior government positions.

Although the small minority of Shi'a citizens generally enjoyed commercial success, there were no Shi'a in top positions in the federal government.

Government Corruption and Transparency

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption. There were no reports of prosecutions during the year.

There were reports of government corruption at the administrative level.

The law provides for public access to government information, but this provision was followed only selectively. Requests for access usually went unanswered. There were no financial disclosure laws for public officials.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Non-governmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

Two local human rights organizations existed. The EHRA became the first quasi-independent human rights organization in the country after its establishment in 2006. The government-subsidized Jurists' Association Human Rights Committee focused on human rights education and conducted seminars and symposia subject to government approval. The EHRA generally operated without government restriction, visited prisons, and issued reports. Government officials were somewhat cooperative and responsive to EHRA views.

Domestic associations were charitable, social, and educational in their purposes. They were required to register with the government and were subject to many regulations and restrictions.

The government did not allow international human rights NGOs to be based in the country, but allowed international

representatives to visit with limited restrictions.

The government generally cooperated with international organizations, including UNICEF and UNHCR. A UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs maintained an office in the country.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution provides for equality before the law without regard to race, nationality, or social status; however, there was legal and cultural discrimination based on gender and nationality.

Women

Rape is punishable by death under the penal code but is often not recognized in Shari'a courts. The penal code does not specifically address spousal rape. Assault without intent to kill is punishable by 10 years in prison, seven years if it results only in disability, and one year if resulting in temporary injury. There was no data regarding the number of abusers who were prosecuted, convicted, or punished.

Domestic abuse against women was a pervasive problem. A 2005 UAE University study indicated that as many as 66 percent of all women permanently residing in the country had been subjected to domestic abuse. Almost 34 percent of respondents age 18 to 30 claimed to have been abused by a family member, and more than 50 percent of respondents stated that they witnessed their mothers being abused in the home. During the year the press reported many cases of spousal abuse, but specific numbers of cases were not available.

Victims of domestic abuse may file complaints with police units stationed in major public hospitals. Social workers and counselors, usually female, also maintained offices in public hospitals and police stations. However, women were often reluctant to file formal charges for social, cultural, and economic reasons. There were several reports that police refused to protect women and instead encouraged them to return home. In some cases the authorities contacted the allegedly abusive husbands to transport their wives home.

There were no specific reports of honor crimes or killings, although such incidents were rumored to occur within the Muslim expatriate population.

The law does not address female genital mutilation (FGM), which was primarily practiced among Somali, Omani, and Sudanese expatriates. The Ministry of Health prohibits hospitals and clinics from performing FGM; however, some private clinics in the northern emirates and rural areas continued to carry out the procedure.

Prostitution is illegal; however, it has become an increasing problem in recent years, particularly in Dubai. Substantial numbers of women reportedly arrived, both voluntary and trafficked, regularly from the former Soviet Union, Africa, South Asia, East Asia, Eastern Europe, and other states of the Middle East for temporary stays, during which they engaged in prostitution and other activities connected to organized crime. Although there was credible evidence that many prostitutes entered the country willingly for economic reasons, others were trafficked into the country. While prostitution was widely acknowledged to exist, the government did not address the issue publicly. However, during the year, there continued to be press reports highlighting the problems of prostitution and human trafficking. In addition to increased policing and tightened immigration procedures, authorities also restricted the number of visas issued to single young women from certain countries of concern; however, problems continued with more facile access at airports in the northern emirates and with airline tourism companies reportedly continuing to obtain tourist visas for prostitutes.

The law prohibits verbal abuse and harassment toward women from men outside the family; however, the penal code allows male guardians within the family to use physical means, including violence, to punish women and children at their discretion. Violators outside of the immediate family are subject to criminal action, including up to one year in prison, a fine of not more than \$2,750 (10,000 dirhams), and deportation for noncitizens. During the year the press reported that men were arrested and prosecuted for harassing women in public. The penal code prohibits "disgracing or dishonoring" a person in public, punishable by a minimum of one year in prison, and up to 15 years if the victim is under the age of 14. An "infamous" act against the rules of decency carries a penalty of six months in prison, and dishonoring a woman by word or deed on a public roadway results in up to one year in prison and a \$2,700 (10,000 dirhams) fine.

The government's interpretation of Shari'a was applied in personal status cases and family law. Muslim women were forbidden to marry non-Muslims. Unlike men, female citizens married to noncitizens did not automatically pass citizenship to their children. The law permits men to have up to four wives. When a woman marries, her separate property (including her dowry, which is set by presidential decision at a maximum of approximately \$13,700 (50,000 dirhams) and the income of her separate property remained under her control and were not commingled with the separate property of her husband. However, there were several cases during the year where a woman's dowry exceeded this maximum amount, ostensibly to make it far more difficult to require a woman to pay it back should there be a divorce. In the event of divorce, a woman takes her separate property, any amount she receives in a property settlement with her husband, plus any allowance

granted for her and her children's maintenance.

Laws of inheritance, according to the government's interpretation of Shari'a, apply to both men and women, although laws of distribution may differ, and women normally inherit less than men. For example, a brother inherits double what the sister inherits when a parent dies.

Divorce is permissible, although it is often very difficult for a woman to obtain. A woman may be granted a divorce if she can prove that her husband has inflicted physical or moral harm upon her. A woman also may sue for divorce if her husband has abandoned her for a minimum of three months, or if he has not maintained her upkeep or that of their children. The 2005 Personal Status Law enables women to obtain a "khul'" divorce, or divorce by petitioning the Shari'a court, by paying compensation or surrendering their dowry to their husbands. The law also affects child custody guidelines, giving divorced women custody of female children only until the age of 13 and male children only until the age of 10. If the court deems the mother to be unfit, custody normally reverts to the next able female relative on the mother's side. A woman who remarries may forfeit her right to the custody of children from a previous marriage.

Fornication is a crime. The government may imprison and deport noncitizen women if they bear children out of wedlock.

There are no legal restrictions on the travel of women. However, by custom and tradition, a husband can bar his wife, minor children, and adult unmarried daughters from leaving the country.

Neither the labor law nor the civil service law, which covers labor matters in the public sector, prohibits the employment of women. A man has no right under Shari'a to ban his wife from working if she was employed at the time of their marriage; however, few husbands interfere in their wives' choice to work.

There are no legal prohibitions against women owning their own businesses. Female citizens working as doctors, architects, and lawyers typically did not face restrictions on licensing their own businesses; noncitizens of either gender may not license a business. However, women who worked outside the home sometimes did not receive equal benefits. Women also reportedly faced discrimination in promotion.

Public sector employees may receive as much as two months' paid maternity leave; however, citizen teachers receive only 45 days' paid maternity leave, with a guaranteed position after maternity leave.

Women constituted 77 percent of all university students. Coeducation is prohibited in public schools and universities except at the UAE University Executive MBA Program. Several private schools, private universities, and institutions are coeducational.

In July a new women's shelter was established and operated under the Dubai Women and Children Charity Foundation to serve victims of human trafficking and domestic violence. It was funded by the government of Dubai and directed by a board of citizens. The shelter was established with the capacity of 300 cases. At year's end it had received 62 cases, 8 of which were trafficking cases. The shelter assisted in repatriating 15 persons during the year.

In November the government of Abu Dhabi sponsored the Women's Global Economic Forum with the aim of encouraging greater participation of women in the workforce.

Children

All citizen children received free health care and free public education through the university level; however noncitizen children receive significantly fewer benefits.

Education is compulsory through the ninth grade. Citizen children are required to attend gender-segregated schools through the sixth grade, the last grade of primary education, when children can be as young as 10 or 11 years old. However, compulsory education was not enforced, and some children did not attend school. In June 2006 the government permitted noncitizen children to enroll in public schools, provided that they score at least 90 percent on entrance exams.

Child abuse was not prevalent. Trafficking of young, noncitizen boys employed as camel jockeys was a problem in the past. The last identified case of a child being used as a jockey acknowledged by MOI occurred in 2005.

Trafficking in Persons

In November 2006 the president issued a comprehensive law prohibiting trafficking in persons. The law prescribes punishments including jail sentences for those convicted of trafficking, including for commercial sexual exploitation and involuntary servitude. Although the government made some progress in combating the problem, the trafficking of men, women, and children from South and East Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East for involuntary servitude and

sexual exploitation continued to be a serious problem.

The country remained a destination country for men and women trafficked for the purpose of involuntary servitude and commercial sexual exploitation.

Women from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Ethiopia, and the Philippines migrated willingly to the country to work as domestic servants, but some faced conditions of involuntary servitude such as excessive work hours without pay; verbal, mental, physical, or sexual abuse; and restrictions on movement. Women from Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East were reportedly trafficked to the country for commercial sexual exploitation.

Although children were previously trafficked from South Asia, Sudan, and Mauritania as child camel jockeys, the government repatriated all identified victims.

Similarly, men from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who came to the country to work in the construction industry were sometimes subject to involuntary servitude and debt bondage in order to pay off recruitment costs sometimes exceeding two years' wages. The country was a destination point for trafficking and also served as a potential transit country for women trafficked into Oman and Sudan and men trafficked into labor in Iraq.

During the year there were no known reports of citizen women or men registering as trafficking victims.

During the year there were a number of local media reports of trafficking in women and girls into the country, especially to Dubai, for commercial sexual exploitation. Observers believed that resident citizen employment sponsors and foreign-based traffickers partnered to facilitate trafficking activity.

Some local and foreign employers physically and sexually abused female domestic servants; in some cases, the situation rose to the level of involuntary servitude. There were reports from foreign embassies that some police authorities pressured victims not to pursue complaints against their employers, and/or assisted the employers in repatriating the victims before a criminal complaint could be filed.

Traffickers may, for example, draw young women, primarily from South Asia and Eastern Europe, to the country with the promise of employment opportunities. Traffickers might supply the women with a fraudulent passport reflecting an age older than the victim's real age. Some victims enter the country on a visitor's or worker's visa, and upon arrival are forced into commercial sexual exploitation.

Although as many as 10,000 women were sexually exploited for profit in the country, prosecutions for sex trafficking remained extremely low relative to the extent of the problem.

During the year Dubai police closed several massage parlors and night clubs suspected of exploiting women for prostitution.

In June Dubai prosecutors investigated two Indians suspected to have sold two housemaids for \$2,450 (9,000 dirhams) and forced them into prostitution. At year's end the court had not handed down a verdict.

On July 10, the Dubai Court of First Instance sentenced two Indians to 15 years imprisonment followed by deportation for sexually exploiting an Indonesian housemaid. This sentence was the first such ruling since the issuance of new trafficking legislation in November 2006.

On July 6, authorities cleared an Indian couple escorting two Indian boys to France from trafficking charges but sentenced them to six months imprisonment for using forged passports for the boys. An Indian man had asked the Indian couple to accompany the boys to France for \$18,400 (67,343 dirhams; 800,000 rupees). On July 23, the Dubai Public Prosecutor appealed against the two verdicts, demanding tougher penalties in both cases. At year's end the case was pending.

The government has not fully developed an effective method to screen and identify actual or potential trafficking victims who do not identify themselves to authorities. As a result, many victims were believed to have been deported without access to protective services or without being able to testify against their traffickers. Victims who were unable to provide evidence of trafficking were sometimes assisted until they acquired travel documents to return home.

For the first time, during the year the Human Rights Care Department sheltered a few female victims in hotels until they could testify against their traffickers. Victims hesitant to contact police departments continued to seek shelter in their respective embassies. At least one private shelter in Dubai also assisted dozens of victims of abuse and trafficking.

On April 8, the government established the National Committee for Combating Human Trafficking. The committee met during the year to discuss regulatory and coordination procedures, improvement of data availability, pending cases, and

prevention measures. It also organized workshops and training programs about anti trafficking. The cabinet authorized the committee to act as the official authority handling international requests, inquiries, and delegations related to trafficking in persons.

On April 23, the government extended a preexisting Child Protection Agreement with UNICEF until May 2009 and allocated \$9 million (30 million dirhams) to rehabilitate former camel jockeys. The government has repatriated 1,077 children since the agreement was signed with UNICEF in 2005. During the year, the government also signed memoranda of understanding with Sudan, Mauritania, Pakistan, and Bangladesh to set up independent claims facilities to hear and determine individual claims by former jockeys from each country.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities. Most public buildings provided some form of access for persons with disabilities. There were no reported incidents of discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment, education, or in the provision of other state services.

The MOL operated five federal rehabilitation centers, which were open only to citizens. The MOL also operated a training and employment center in Al-Ain and implemented a program to educate 75 students with mental disabilities. There were reported inadequacies in both public and private centers, including unqualified teachers and supervisors, a lack of adequate health care and unreasonably high costs of private centers.

One percent of all jobs in the federal government and two percent of government jobs in Abu Dhabi Emirate are reserved for persons with disabilities. The percentage of persons with disabilities employed by the government was not known.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Societal discrimination against noncitizens, who comprised approximately 80 percent of the resident population, was prevalent and occurred in most areas of daily life, including employment, housing, social interaction, and healthcare. National origin played an important role in employment, immigration, and security policies, as well as cultural attitudes towards noncitizens. More than 50 percent of foreign workers were estimated to have come from the Indian subcontinent.

Noncitizens were denied equal access to public education, public health care, housing, and social and recreational club memberships.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Both civil law and Shari'a criminalize homosexual activity, and Islamic religious law holds the death penalty as punishment for individuals who engage in consensual homosexual activities. During the year there were reports that the government deported and sentenced to prison individuals for being openly homosexual.

Crossdressing, according to the law, is a punishable offence. On February 3, Dubai police called several men and women to be interrogated for crossdressing in public during a sports celebration parade.

On July 14, three citizen men gang-raped a 15-year-old Swiss-French boy. The authorities initially did not disclose that one of the men was hepatitis and HIV-positive and threatened to charge the victim with homosexual acts when he first reported the rape. The victim left the country before any criminal prosecution. Authorities sentenced on December 12 two of the men to 15 years in jail, and the third defendant, a 17-year-old, (prosecuted at Juvenile Court) awaited his sentence at year's end.

There were credible reports that government officials discriminated against prisoners with HIV by not granting commuted sentences or parole that other prisoners with similar records had received.

Noncitizen residents infected with HIV were denied all health care benefits, quarantined, and deported.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law does not authorize workers to form or join unions, and none existed. The labor law does not cover domestic workers, government workers, or agricultural workers. Professional organizations existed, and collective work dispute resolution was permitted. However, international affiliation by professional associations must be approved by the government.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law does not explicitly prohibit or permit strikes or collective bargaining units for private and public sector employees.

The government granted some professional associations with mostly citizen membership a limited ability to raise work-related issues to petition the government for redress and to file grievances with the government. Foreign workers may belong to these associations; however, they do not have voting rights and cannot serve on the boards of these organizations.

An extremely small number of workers were eligible to pursue resolution of a collective labor dispute due to the lack of unions. Employees covered by the labor law may file individual or collective employment dispute complaints in Arabic with the MOL, which serves as the mediator between the parties. The law gives the MOL two weeks to resolve the dispute, although in practice, it generally takes a month or more. If the dispute remains unresolved, the employee may file a complaint with the labor court system, and the case is transferred to the Conciliation Council. The Conciliation Council is required to issue decisions within two weeks from the date of the dispute. In all cases, complaints must be filed with the MOL before they can be submitted to the court for consideration. Labor cases are usually quickly adjudicated and not subject to court fees. In practice most cases are resolved through direct mediation, and if that fails, are sent directly to the courts without going to the Conciliation Council. When a case is delayed, the MOL generally grants the worker temporary permission to legally continue employment in the country. During the year the MOL settled 26 percent of complaints.

Domestic and agricultural workers faced considerable obstacles in negotiating employment contracts because the law does not protect them or give them negotiating power. They also faced considerable challenges in obtaining assistance to resolve disputes with their employers. The law ties workers' residency permission to their sponsorship by their employer. Most employment contracts stipulate that for six months after the end of employment, the employee is forbidden from working for a "competitor," unless the former employee obtains a letter of "no objection" from the former employer. This regulation has been widely used to restrict foreign worker labor, including both domestic workers and workers under the labor law, mobility inside the country. However, although no formal ministerial decision had been issued at year's end, the MOL had in some cases stopped upholding its requirement for a letter of "no objection" from the former employer if the employee had completed three years in the position.

On April 1, the MOL established a new contract to govern the relationship between employers and domestic workers. According to the new contract, domestic workers absconding from their employers have no right to claim for wages and would be subject to punishment per the country's entry and residency law. The domestic worker would serve a four-month paid probation period. During the probation period, an employer would consider whether the domestic worker was able to meet the expectations of the job and if the domestic worker should be retained. The domestic worker has the right to obtain payment for travel from the employer after termination of the contract, but if the domestic worker wishes to terminate the two-year contract before it expires, the worker must pay for travel to their home country. If a domestic worker is not qualified or absconds during the probation period, the recruitment agencies must pay back all expenses, including air fare, to the sponsor. If a domestic worker dies during employment, recruitment agencies are obligated to repatriate the body and personal belongings. The sponsor must pay the domestic workers' their dues owed.

The law does not explicitly outlaw strikes but allows an employer the right to suspend an employee for temporarily striking. According to the law, the government may cancel the work permit of and deport any foreign workers absent from work for more than seven days without a valid reason. The individual would also be banned from working in the country for one year. In general the government has not punished workers for nonviolent protests in response to non-payment of wages by employers. However, unlike previous years, during the year the government took measures to break-up nonviolent protests.

On March 11, the MOL implemented an administrative directive providing stern measures against workers instigating strikes and violence, including the cancellation of labor cards, permanent work bans, and the end of service benefits.

The government prohibited strikes by public sector employees on national security grounds. Public sector employees may file an administrative grievance or a case in the civil courts to address a labor-related dispute or grievance.

At year's end approximately 67,000 workers had participated in 30 strikes. Most complaints were related to unpaid wages and hazardous or abusive working conditions.

On July 21, the government ended a four-day strike at a gas processing plant by sending in the armed forces.

On August 3, the government deported 24 of approximately 500 noncitizen construction workers for attempting to strike in protest of their wages.

Also in August, approximately 600 workers refused to work in objection to high deductions of food allowances from their salaries. Reports indicated that the MOL discussed the problem with the employer. At year's end there were no reports as

to the outcome.

In October 4,000 laborers in Dubai staged a strike for higher wages and better working conditions. Some of these strikers reportedly vandalized a building and attacked police and vehicles with stones.

On October 29, the government deported workers involved in a protest in Jebel Ali industrial area. The MOL reported that their visas were cancelled, and they received a lifetime ban from working in the country.

On November 1, more than 30,000 noncitizen employees of Arabtec Construction protested unlivable wages for 10 days. The government deported more than 200 of the protesters.

On November 7, according to news reports, more than 2,000 construction laborers protested their working conditions. Workers destroyed buses and machinery during the incident, which led to a four-hour stand off with police.

Businesses in the free trade zones do not have to comply with labor statutes. The MOL did not regulate the free trade zones; instead, each free trade zone maintains its own labor department, which acts as the government regulating body for free zone labor operations.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor; however, employment agents continued to bring numerous foreign workers to the country to work under forced or compulsory conditions. There continued to be reports of worker suicides. Some women were brought to the country under false promises of legitimate employment and forced into prostitution. Low-paid unskilled and semi-skilled workers were also victims of contract switching, which occurs when a worker is offered a certain position but receives a visa labor card for a different position.

Lack of payment to employees for extended periods of time was common. During the year, according to news reports, foreign laborers working for some private companies had not been paid for several months, some cases for six months or more.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits employment of persons under the age of 15 and has special provisions for employing persons 15 to 18 years of age. The MOL is responsible for enforcing these regulations. The government does not issue work permits for foreign workers under the age of 18 years. Child labor was not generally a problem throughout the year; however, there were reports of children laborers who came to the country under their parents' work permits, and then were required to work.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The government does not impose a minimum wage or have minimum wage guidelines, leaving much of the workforce without sufficient compensation for more than a minimal subsistence. Salaries, which depend on the occupation and employer, were estimated to range upwards from \$109 (400 dirhams) per month for domestic or agricultural workers and from \$164 (600 dirhams) per month for construction workers. Highly skilled and white-collar employees generally received higher salaries.

The expatriate labor force has increased by about 30 percent annually; during the year noncitizens comprised approximately 98 percent of the private sector workforce. Most foreign workers did not earn the minimum salary required in order to obtain residency permits for their families. It was common for an employee to be required to pay back up to one year's salary in illegal recruiters fees. The required monthly minimum salary for an accompanying family to obtain residency permits is \$1,090 (3,924 dirhams); the minimum salary requirement is \$817 (2,941 dirhams) per month when the government provides housing or an additional housing allowance to the foreign worker.

While compensation packages generally provided housing or housing allowances; low-skilled employees were often provided with substandard living conditions, including overcrowded apartments or lodging in unsafe and unhygienic "labor camps," which sometimes lacked electricity, potable water, and adequate cooking and bathing facilities. On May 29, the crown prince of Sharjah issued a decree to improve labor accommodations. According to the decree, up to six persons can be housed in one room, with at least 3.5 square meters per worker. However, in practice it was common for 10 or more persons to live in one room. Some low-paid workers did not receive basic benefits, even if stipulated in their contracts. Local newspapers detailed numerous cases of non-payment of wages to foreign workers. Reports of employers not paying the water or electricity were common.

During the year the MOL received approximately 17,000 labor complaints with 20,000 workers involved in the disputes.

The standard workday is eight hours per day, and the standard workweek is six days per week; however, these standards were not enforced. There was no legal provision requiring overtime pay, nor was there a prohibition on excessive compulsory overtime. According to the MOL and the labor law, employees are entitled to two days of annual leave per month after completing each of the first two six-month periods on the job; after the first year, employees are entitled to 30 calendar days of annual leave, in addition to national holidays.

The law requires that employers provide employees with a safe work and living environment. During the year there were several complaints of poor sanitation and lack of access to toilets for workers. Local medical experts recommended that it was inadvisable for laborers to work outdoors when the temperature exceeded 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit), and that employers provide safety helmets and adjust work hours to reduce exposure to the sun. However, in practice many companies violated this safety standard.

The MOL requires a two and one-half hour break from 12:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. for outdoor laborers during July and August, the hottest months of the year. However, in July the MOL decided to exclude certain professions and activities from this break. Oil sector workers and asphalt and cement mixing and setting workers, for example, were no longer allowed to take the midday break, which put workers at risk for heat exhaustion.

Companies found violating the midday break decree were fined \$2,723 (10,000 dirhams) and made liable for a \$5,445 (20,000 dirhams) fee in the case of a second violation. On July 16, it was reported that companies were forced to pay more than \$327,708 (1.2 million dirhams) in fines for violating the mid-day break rule during the first 13 days of July. In addition to fines, companies found in violation of the law risked being placed in a lower company category, thereby forced to pay higher fees with the MOL. The number of firms violating the midday break decree during the year reached 530. One company caught violating the decree twice had to pay a total of \$5,445 (20,000 dirhams). During the summer the total amount collected from firms violating the rule amounted to \$2.45 million (9 million dirhams). While the decree was generally enforced effectively, there was a shortage of labor inspectors to enforce the mid-day break rule in the larger Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, where most violations occurred.

There were also insufficient numbers of inspectors and resources to adequately enforce occupational health and safety codes. While at year's end the MOL did not employ language professionals to assist in interpretation for foreign workers, businesses often requested informal assistance from employees with language skills. The government did not uniformly enforce health and safety standards or require every large industrial enterprise to employ a certified occupational safety officer.

There were press reports during the year of cases of workers who were injured or killed on the job site as a result of inadequate safety measures. For example, on September 12, reports stated that two accidental deaths occurred at work sites in Abu Dhabi during August; one worker died as a result of exhaustion after working 24 consecutive hours. On November 8, seven workers were killed and 19 injured when a bridge under construction collapsed. Although law requires the government to track job-related injuries and deaths, in practice the government registers the cases but does not necessarily follow up on them.

Workers' jobs were not protected if they removed themselves from what they considered to be unsafe working conditions. Injured workers are entitled to fair compensation, and all workers have the right to lodge labor-related grievances. Workers, particularly unskilled laborers, in disputes with their employers over unpaid wages, generally agreed to a mediated settlement for less money than they were owed in order to avoid a protracted court battle. However, workers in disputes with employers generally do not take action due to fear of reprisals, including withdrawal of sponsorship or deportation.

Although a 2003 ruling by the Federal Supreme Court prohibited employers from legally withholding employees' passports, the practice was common, and there have been no recent or consistent attempts by the Ministries of Labor or Interior to enforce the regulation. However, 175,000 individuals without legal status freely left the country during an amnesty for illegal workers that took place between June 3 and November 3.

