

■ In August, Jehovah's Witness Gulchehra Abdullaeva reported that she had been tortured at a police station in the town of Hazorasp, to make her confess to smuggling banned religious literature into Uzbekistan, a charge she denied. Police officers arbitrarily detained her in July after she returned from a trip to Kazakhstan. She said that they forced her to stand for hours without food or water, placed a gas mask over her head and cut off the air supply to suffocate her. She was made to sign a statement admitting to participating in proscribed religious activities and was then released. On 28 July she was convicted by the Hazorasp District Court of "teaching religious beliefs privately", and fined. Gulchehra Abdullaeva appealed against her sentence and lodged official complaints with the authorities but officials refused to respond or address her complaints.

Counter-terror and security

The authorities continued to seek the extradition of suspected members of Islamic movements and Islamist groups and parties banned in Uzbekistan in the name of security and the fight against terrorism. They also requested the extradition of political opponents, government critics and wealthy individuals out of favour with the regime. Many of these extradition requests were based on fabricated or unreliable evidence. The government offered diplomatic assurances to sending states to secure the returns, pledging free access to detention centres for independent monitors and diplomats. In practice, they did not honour these guarantees. Those forcibly returned to Uzbekistan faced incommunicado detention, torture and other ill-treatment and, after unfair trials, long prison sentences in cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions. The authorities were also accused of attempting assassinations of political opponents living abroad.

■ On 22 February, imam Obidkhon Nazarov, a refugee in Sweden since 2006, was shot in the head outside his home by an unidentified gunman. He remained in a coma. He was a popular dissident imam who had often publicly criticized the Uzbekistani authorities for their repression of independent Muslim groups. He had fled Uzbekistan in 2000, but in 2005 he was accused of being an organizer of the Andizhan protests and ensuing violence. The authorities had sought his extradition ever since and denounced him as a security threat to Uzbekistan. In the trial following his assassination attempt, the judge noted that he was

most likely targeted for his political beliefs by a group from outside Sweden. The state prosecutor accused the authorities in Uzbekistan of having organized the assassination attempt. The lawyer representing Obidkhon Nazarov's family and many of his supporters blamed the Uzbekistani security services.

■ Ruslan Suleymanov was extradited from Ukraine to Uzbekistan on 20 September. He had moved to Ukraine in November 2010, fearing that he would be subjected to an unfair trial and to possible torture and other ill-treatment. He had been a manager in a private construction company in Uzbekistan which was targeted for takeover by business rivals in 2008. When the company refused to submit, it was raided by security services and company managers, including Ruslan Suleymanov, were investigated for economic crimes. He was detained in Ukraine in February 2011 following an extradition request from Uzbekistan. Although the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, had recognized him as a refugee under its mandate in May and was seeking his resettlement, he was nevertheless extradited from Ukraine on 20 September, and in November his family reported that he was being held in pre-trial detention in Tashkent.

VENEZUELA

BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF VENEZUELA

Head of state and government:

Hugo Chávez Frías

Levels of violent crime, especially gun-related crime, remained high despite efforts to control the availability and use of firearms. Violence in prisons remained widespread and riots continued. The government initiated its withdrawal from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

Background

Venezuela's human rights record was assessed under the UN Universal Periodic Review, whose report was adopted in March. Venezuela had accepted several of the recommendations made, including those on human rights defenders. It made a commitment to support their activities and to publicly recognize their

role. However, it had rejected several recommendations, including to formulate a National Human Rights Plan and to issue standing invitations to regional and international human rights mechanisms and bodies.

In November, Venezuela became a member of the UN Human Rights Council, thereby making a commitment to co-operate with its Special Procedures and its universal system for the promotion and protection of human rights. By the end of 2012, Venezuela's ratification of several international human rights instruments and requests made by six Special Rapporteurs to visit the country remained pending.

Presidential elections took place in October. Election day was largely peaceful and approximately 81% of voters cast ballots, one of the highest levels of participation in Venezuelan history. Incumbent President Hugo Chávez was elected for a third six-year term.

Public security

Venezuela had one of the highest murder rates in Latin America due, among other factors, to the uncontrolled availability of firearms and ammunition. There also were concerns about the use of firearms by the police. According to a report from the National Police General Council, 80% of police institutions were using weapons that did not follow institutional guidelines. Lack of any other official and precise information on violence, especially around injury from firearms, remained a concern.

In 2012, the Presidential Commission for the Control of Arms, Munitions and Disarmament conducted research and consultations with the general public and initiated public campaigns to encourage people to voluntarily turn in their firearms. The government's new security initiative "Gran Misión a Toda Vida Venezuela" pledged to continue this work of disarmament, including through the creation of a national support system for the victims of gun violence.

In 2012, small arms were restricted in certain public areas and a new registration system was established to increase control over the existing firearms. People who owned small firearms were encouraged to register them, while new requests for licences to carry firearms were suspended for a year. At the end of 2012, a draft arms control law was before Congress.

Prison conditions

Violence in prisons was widespread. At least 591 people were killed in Venezuelan prisons during the year. Firearms, explosives, and other weapons continued to be routinely used in prison clashes.

■ In July, the announcement of a transfer of inmates from the Andean Region Penitentiary in Merida state to other prisons sparked a 20-day riot that left 17 people dead.

■ In August, an outbreak of violence resulted in 26 deaths and 43 people injured in Yare prison.

Human rights defenders

Government officials and the state-run media continued to make baseless accusations against human rights defenders in an attempt to delegitimize their work. Human rights defenders were also the targets of physical attacks; those responsible were not brought to justice.

■ In May, Marianela Sánchez Ortiz of the Venezuelan Observatory of Prisons (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones, OVP) was threatened. Her husband, Hernán Antonio Bolívar, was abducted at gunpoint and told to warn his wife to stop complaining about prison conditions and criticizing the government, or she and her family would face reprisals. Government officials also accused the OVP of falsifying information about prisons in order to receive money from US funders.

Impunity

■ In December, Jorge Antonio Barrios was assassinated in Aragua state. He was the ninth member of the Barrios family to be killed since 1998 in circumstances suggesting police involvement. The killings continued despite decisions since 2004 by the inter-American human rights system ordering Venezuela to ensure protection for the family and to bring those responsible to justice.

Independence of the judiciary

■ Judge María Lourdes Afiuni remained under house arrest throughout 2012. In September, unidentified gunmen drove past the building where she lives and opened fire, aiming towards her apartment. In November, she disclosed publicly that she had been raped while in jail. Judge Afiuni was detained in December 2009 and remained imprisoned for over a year. She was charged with offences including corruption, abuse of authority and association to commit a crime. She had ordered the

conditional release of a banker who had been held in custody awaiting trial for more than two years, a decision within her remit and in line with Venezuelan law.

International scrutiny

In May, President Chávez, with the support of the National Assembly and the Supreme Court, announced plans to withdraw from the inter-American human rights system. In September, Venezuela officially removed itself as a signatory of the American Convention on Human Rights, thereby initiating its withdrawal from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. As a result, victims of human rights violations will be barred from September 2013 from bringing complaints before the highest court in the Americas. However, Venezuela will remain a member of the OAS and so will be subject to monitoring by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Violence against women and girls

The Law on the Right of Women to Live Free of Violence continued to lack a regulatory framework that establishes guidelines on how the authorities should handle cases of violence against women.

■ Hearings were held in the case of Alexandra Hidalgo, who was raped and tortured by a group of men, among them her husband, in 2004. In October it was decided that her husband would stand trial for her kidnapping and rape.

Amnesty International visits/reports

🚗 Amnesty International delegates visited Venezuela in April.

📄 Carta abierta a los candidatos y las candidatas presidenciales de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela (AMR 53/006/2012)

📄 Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela's candidacy for election to the UN Human Rights Council: Open letter (AMR 53/008/2012)

VIET NAM

SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIET NAM

Head of state:

Truong Tan Sang

Head of government:

Nguyen Tan Dung

Repression of government critics and activists worsened, with severe restrictions on freedom of expression, association and assembly. At least 25 peaceful dissidents, including bloggers and songwriters, were sentenced to long prison terms in 14 trials that failed to meet international standards. Members of ethnic and religious groups faced human rights violations. At least 86 people were sentenced to death, with more than 500 on death row.

Background

A political crisis arose over alleged mishandling of the economy, with high inflation and debt levels, and corruption scandals linked to state businesses. A secret "criticism" and "self-criticism" programme in the ruling Communist Party lasted for several months. The Prime Minister publicly apologized for economic mismanagement, but retained his position. Public consultations were announced on amending the 1992 Constitution, and on gay marriage. An escalation of the territorial conflict with China in the East Sea (also known as the South China Sea) resulted in anti-China demonstrations in Viet Nam. Reports of land disputes and violent forced evictions increased. Viet Nam announced it would run for a seat on the UN Human Rights Council in 2014-2016. In November, Viet Nam adopted the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, despite serious concerns that it fell short of international standards.

Freedom of expression

Repression of dissent and attacks on the rights to freedom of expression and assembly continued. Short-term arrests of people taking part in peaceful demonstrations occurred, including in June, when 30 farmers were arrested after protesting for three days outside government buildings in Ha Noi about being forcibly evicted three years earlier.

■ In September, the Prime Minister called for greater controls on the internet and ordered legal action to be taken against three named blogs after they reported on the political crisis.