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## U.S. Department of State

### Finland Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, January 30, 1997.

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#### FINLAND

Finland is a constitutional republic with an elected head of state (president), parliament, and head of government (prime minister), and with an independent judiciary.

The security apparatus is effectively controlled by elected officials and supervised by the courts.

Finland has a mixed economy, primarily and extensively market based.

During 1996 there were no reported violations of fundamental human rights.

#### RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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

###### a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

There were no reports of political or other extrajudicial killings.

###### b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

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

The law prohibits such practices, and there were no reports that officials employed them.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile, and the Government observes this prohibition.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provides for the right to fair public trial, and an independent judiciary vigorously enforces this right. The President appoints Supreme Court justices, who in turn appoint the lower court judges.

Local courts may conduct a trial behind closed doors in juvenile, matrimonial, and guardianship cases, or when publicity would offend morality or endanger the security of the State. In national security cases, the judge may withhold from the public any or all information pertaining to charges, verdicts, and sentences. The law provides for sanctions against violators of such restrictions.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

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

The law prohibits such practices. Government authorities generally respect these prohibitions, and violations are subject to effective legal sanction.

**Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:**

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The law provides for freedom of the press, and the Government respects this right in practice. An independent press, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combine to ensure freedom of speech and of the press, including academic freedom.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The law provides for these rights, and the Government respects them in practice.

c. Freedom of Religion

The law provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice.

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

The law provides for these rights, and the Government respects them in practice.

The Government cooperates with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees. Approved refugees and asylum seekers are processed directly for residence. The issue of the provision of first asylum has never arisen. There were no reports of forced expulsion of those having a valid claim to refugee status.

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

The Constitution provides citizens with the right to peacefully change their Government, and citizens exercise this right in practice through periodic, free and fair elections held on the basis of universal suffrage.

Women are fairly well represented in government. There are 67 in the 200-member Parliament, and 7 in the 18-member Cabinet. The Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense as well as the Associate Minister of Finance are women, as are the Speaker of Parliament and the President of the Bank of Finland. In 1995 Parliament passed quota legislation for all state committees, commissions, and appointed municipal bodies, requiring a minimum of 40 percent membership from each sex.

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

A number of human rights groups operate without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials are very cooperative and responsive to their views.

### Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status

The law prohibits any discrimination based on race, sex, religion, disability, language, or social status, and the Government effectively enforces these provisions.

Assaults by local "skinheads" on a black American in November 1995 focused attention on racism and xenophobia in Finland. President Ahtisaari mentioned the danger of xenophobia and racism in his New Year's speech to the nation. A ministerial group was established to devise a government program against racism by year's end. Initial plans include improved human rights training for police and other officials and more antidiscrimination education. Antiracism public relations activities increased and include projects targeting elementary and secondary schools.

#### Women

The law provides for stringent penalties for violence against women; this provision is vigorously enforced by the police and the courts. The Union of Shelter Homes as well as the municipalities maintain such homes for female, male, and child victims of violence in homes all over the country. The total number of shelter units is around 55. Studies show that the opening of a shelter home in an area brings cases of family violence out into the open. The concept of family violence in Finland includes negligence in care, psychological violence, and economic abuse. The annual number of calls to the police relating to domestic violence is no longer centrally compiled but is estimated at some 10,000 to 12,000. Shelter officials state that the figure is less than half of the number of actual incidents. Police statistics from January to June show an overall rise of 10 percent in the number of assaults (statistics not broken down by sex). There were 100 cases of rape reported to police during this period. Government experts note no evidence of a significant change in the incidence of rape in recent years but say that as many as half of all rapes may go unreported.

The government-established Council for Equality coordinates and sponsors legislation to meet the needs of women as workers, mothers, widows, or retirees.

In 1985 Parliament passed a comprehensive equal rights law which mandates equal treatment for women

in the workplace, including equal pay for "comparable" jobs. In practice comparable worth has not been implemented because of the difficulty of establishing criteria, but the Government, employers, unions, and others continue to work on implementation plans. Women's average earnings are 80 percent of those of men, and women still tend to be segregated in lower paying occupations. While women have individually attained leadership positions in the private and public sectors, there are disproportionately fewer women in top management jobs. Industry and finance, the labor movement, and some government ministries remain male dominated. Women are permitted to serve in the military. The Government's Equality Ombudsman monitors compliance with regulations against sexual discrimination. Of the 100 complaints processed by the Ombudsman between January 1 and June 30, 29 cases were established as violations of the law.

## Children

The Government demonstrates its strong commitment to children's rights and welfare through its well-funded systems of public education and medical care. There is no pattern of societal abuse of children, and the national consensus supporting children's rights is enshrined in law.

## People with Disabilities

Although the law has required since the 1970's that new public buildings be accessible to people with physical disabilities, many older buildings remain inaccessible to them. There is no such law for public transportation, but each municipality subsidizes measures to improve accessibility to vehicles. Local governments maintain a free transport service that guarantees 18 free trips per month for a disabled person. The deaf and the mute are provided interpretation services ranging from 120 to 240 hours annually. The Government provides subsidized public housing to the severely disabled.

## Indigenous People

Sami (Lapps), who constitute less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the population, benefit from legal provisions protecting minority rights and customs. Sami language and culture are supported financially by the Government. The Sami receive subsidies to enable them to continue their traditional lifestyle, which revolves around reindeer herding. Sami have full political and civil rights and are able to participate in decisions affecting their economic and cultural interests.

## Section 6 Worker Rights

### a. The Right of Association

The Constitution provides for the rights of trade unions to organize, to assemble peacefully, and to strike, and the Government respects these provisions. About 87 percent of the work force is organized. All unions are independent of the Government and political parties. The law grants public sector employees the right to strike, with some exceptions for provision of essential services. In the first of 1996, there were 36 strikes, 35 of which were wildcat strikes.

Trade unions freely affiliate with international bodies.

### b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law provides for the right to organize and bargain collectively. Collective bargaining agreements are usually based on incomes policy agreements between employee and employer central organizations and

the Government. The law protects workers against antiunion discrimination. Complaint resolution is governed by collective bargaining agreements as well as labor law, both of which are adequately enforced.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced Compulsory Labor

The Constitution prohibits forced or compulsory labor, and this prohibition is honored in practice.

d. Minimum Age for Employment of Children

Youths under 16 years of age cannot work more than 6 hours a day or at night, and education is compulsory for children from 7 to 16 years of age. The Labor Ministry enforces child labor regulations. There are virtually no complaints of exploitation of children in the work force.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There is no legislated minimum wage, but the law requires all employers--including nonunionized ones--to meet the minimum wages agreed to in collective bargaining agreements in the respective industrial sector. These minimum wages generally afford a decent standard of living for workers and their families.

The legal workweek consists of 5 days not exceeding 40 hours. Employees working in shifts or during the weekend are entitled to a 24-hour rest period during the week. The law is effectively enforced as a minimum, and many workers enjoy even stronger benefits through effectively enforced collective bargaining agreements.

The Government sets occupational health and safety standards, and the Labor Ministry effectively enforces them. Workers can refuse dangerous work situations, without risk of penalty.

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