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Iceland

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2005](#)

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Iceland, with a population of 300 thousand, is a constitutional republic and a parliamentary democracy; executive authority is vested in the prime minister, the president is head of state, and the unicameral Althingi parliament constitutes the legislative branch. In June 2004 Olafur Ragnar Grimsson was reelected as president in free and fair elections. In September 2004 Foreign Minister Halldor Asgrimsson (Progressive) replaced Prime Minister David Oddsson (Independence) based on a coalition agreement. The civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces.

The government generally respected the human rights of its citizens, and the law and judiciary provided effective means of addressing individual instances of abuse. The following human rights problems were reported:

- violence against women
- societal discrimination against minorities and foreigners
- isolated reports of women trafficked to the country

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

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions generally met international standards.

Following retraining of staff in 2004 on proper procedures for safeguarding prisoner welfare, prison officers' calls to a staff psychiatrist increased, demonstrating greater responsiveness to prisoner needs. However, in a December report the Council of Europe (COE) Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern that prisoners did not have access to specialized mental health care services. The commissioner urged the authorities to arrange for treatment outside the prison system if necessary to meet individual care requirements.

The government maintained a separate minimum-security prison for women inmates; however, because so few women were incarcerated, some men were also held there. In the rare instances when juvenile offenders were incarcerated, they were held with adults, since there was no separate facility for juveniles. Pretrial detainees were held together with convicted prisoners.

The government permitted visits by independent human rights observers, and from July 4 to 6 the COE Commissioner for Human Rights visited the Reception Center for Asylum-seekers in Njardvik, the police station at Keflavik Airport, the police headquarters and its detention facility in Reykjavik, and the Litla Hraun Prison.

During the year 77 persons placed in custody spent 8.2 days on average in solitary confinement. The total amount of time that they spent in isolation was more than a month in 5 percent of cases. The daily average number of remand prisoners in isolation was 1.7, while the total

number of days they spent there was 630 out of a total of 5,884 days in custody. All 11 reported cases of minors placed in custody involved some use of isolation.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, and the government generally observed these prohibitions.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The minister of justice heads the police force. The national commissioner of police administers and runs police operations that require centralized coordination among various offices. Various district chiefs of police have responsibility for law enforcement in their areas, investigate criminal offenses, and have prosecution powers. The police force was effective, and corruption was not a problem. Complaints regarding police abuses could be directed to a state prosecutor, which in turn would seek investigative assistance from the national commissioner or, if the national commissioner were the subject of the investigation, the Reykjavik police department.

Arrest and Detention

Police may make arrests: when they believe a prosecutable offense has been committed; where necessary to prevent further offenses or destruction of evidence; to protect the suspect's safety; or when someone refuses to obey police orders to move. Arrest warrants were not always required. Persons placed under arrest are entitled to legal counsel, which is provided by the government if they are indigent; receive a form for their signature that outlines their rights and options; and within 24 hours of the arrest appear before a judge who rules whether they need to remain in custody during the investigation and may grant conditional release subject to assurances that the accused will appear for trial. In his December report, the COE Commissioner for Human Rights recommended that only judges, rather than police and prosecutors, be permitted to place detainees, especially minors, in solitary confinement. There were no reports of political detainees.

In June the case of three men who alleged they had been wrongfully detained when protesting the official visit of Chinese Premier Jiang Zemin in 2002 was settled out of court for an undisclosed amount. In February Reykjavik district court awarded a fourth man \$1,406 (ISK 90 thousand), with interest, for wrongfully arresting him in connection with the same protest.

In November the Supreme Court upheld the April conviction of a police officer for a 2004 incident in which he pulled his police car in front of a speeding motorcycle, causing a crash that injured the motorcyclist; however, the Supreme Court suspended for two years the lower court's imposition on the officer of an approximately \$3,200 (ISK 200 thousand) fine.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provides for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected this provision in practice.

There are two levels of courts: district courts, of which there are eight, and the Supreme Court. The minister of justice appoints all judges, who serve for life.

Trial Procedures

Courts do not use juries, but multijudge panels are common, particularly in the Supreme Court. The courts presume defendants' innocence and generally try them without delay. Defendants receive access to legal counsel of their own choosing. For defendants unable to pay attorneys' fees, the government covers the cost; however, defendants who are found guilty must reimburse the government. Defendants have the right to be present at their trial, to confront witnesses, and to participate in the proceedings; they and their attorneys have access to government-held evidence relevant to their cases. At the discretion of the courts, prosecutors may introduce evidence that police have obtained illegally. With limited exceptions trials are public and conducted fairly. Defendants have the right to appeal, and the Supreme Court handles appeals expeditiously.

Political Prisoners

There were no reports of political prisoners.

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

The law prohibits such actions, and the government generally respected these prohibitions in practice.

In order to obtain a permit to stay in the country based on marriage with a citizen or holder of a resident permit, a partner or spouse must be at least 24 years of age. In August and December, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the COE Commissioner of Human Rights, respectively, expressed concern about this requirement.

In May 2004 the parliament amended the law to give authorities the power to conduct house searches without a prior court order when there is a significant risk that any delay would jeopardize an investigation of immigration fraud, as well as to request DNA tests in cases where they suspect immigration fraud. Human rights and immigrants' advocates criticized the amendments for infringing on individuals' privacy. In

practice neither home searches without warrants nor DNA tests have taken place.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The law provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respected these rights in practice and did not restrict academic freedom or the Internet. An independent press, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to ensure freedom of speech and of the press.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The law provides for freedom of assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights in practice.

c. Freedom of Religion

The law provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respected this right in practice. The state financially supported and promoted the official religion, Lutheranism. This adversely affected other religions in that they did not receive equal time or deference in school curricula or comparable subsidies for their faith-based programming.

The law specifies conditions and procedures that religious organizations must follow to be registered by the government. Such recognition was necessary for religious organizations other than the state church to receive a per capita share of church tax funds from the government. The government did not place any restrictions or requirements on unregistered religious organizations, which had the same rights as other groups in society.

All citizens 16 years of age and older must pay an annual church tax of approximately \$127 (ISK 7,800) and an annual cemetery tax of approximately \$48 (ISK 2,952). For persons who were not registered as belonging to a religious organization, or who belonged to one that was not registered and officially recognized, the tax payment went to the University of Iceland, a secular institution. Atheists and humanists objected to having their fee go to the university, asserting that this was inconsistent with the right of freedom of association.

The law mandates religious instruction in Christianity in the public schools; however, students may be exempted from attending the classes.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There are no official groups representing Jews in the country, and the community numbers under 100 individuals.

There were no reports of physical violence against Jews or acts of violence against, or vandalism of, Jewish community institutions during the year.

The law establishes penalties of fines and up to two years in prison for verbal or physical assault on an individual or group based on their religion. In March a prominent public figure made strongly anti-Semitic comments that were widely reported in the media. Despite numerous calls from human rights advocates for him to face prosecution under the law, authorities did not pursue a case.

In April the government faced media criticism after the prime minister declined to apologize for the country's deportation of Jews to Germany in the period immediately preceding World War II.

In August 2004 a Jewish visitor reported in an online newsmagazine that he and a friend had been harassed by a group of young teenagers who pointed at his yarmulke, gave a "heil Hitler" salute, and then briefly blocked the visitors' exit from a parking lot and intimidated them. A daily newspaper reported the story, sparking over 30 online comments from correspondents based in the country. Some of the comments were themselves anti-Semitic or xenophobic in tone and content. The visitor also complained about a swastika-like emblem on a prominent Reykjavik building. The emblem was in fact a Thor's hammer, an ancient Icelandic symbol and the logo of a national shipping line headquartered in the building. In May new owners of the building covered the emblem to avoid confusion and offense to those not familiar with its origin.

For a more detailed discussion, see the [2005 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

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

The law provides for these rights, and the government generally respected them in practice.

The law prohibits forced exile, and the government did not employ it.

Protection of Refugees

The law provides 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 established a system for providing protection to refugees. In practice the government provided some protection against *refoulement*, the return of persons to a country where they feared persecution. The government granted refugee status or asylum. The government cooperated with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees but had no fixed refugee acceptance requirements.

Processing of asylum cases may take a year or more, during which time asylum seekers were eligible for state-subsidized health care, could enroll their children in public schools and apply for work permits; however, human rights advocates criticized the law for not specifying which "significant human rights reasons" must underpin granting of such permits. The law stipulates that children of asylum seekers have to be in the country for three months before they may attend public schools. Some children of asylum seekers were enrolled in public schools during the year.

In August the CERD expressed concern about reports that asylum requests were not always properly handled by border guards; and encouraged the government to intensify its efforts to provide systematic training to these officials.

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

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

Elections and Political Participation

The last presidential election was held in June 2004, when Olafur Ragnar Grimsson won 85.6 percent of the valid votes for his third term. While the office of the president is mostly ceremonial, there are no limits on how many times an incumbent may run for office. Elections to the parliament in 2003 were free and fair. Center-right coalitions have governed since 1991.

There were 21 women in the 63-seat parliament and 3 women in the 12-member cabinet. Two of 9 Supreme Court members and 10 of 38 district court judges were women. Foreigners who have resided in the country legally for 5 years (3 years for Scandinavian citizens) may vote in municipal elections. There were no minorities in the legislature.

Government Corruption and Transparency

There were isolated reports of government corruption during the year. Following an investigation, the state auditor found in June that the prime minister's official participation in the 2001 privatization of the state-owned Bunadarbanki was lawful, despite his personal financial connections with the bank. In September the ombudsman of parliament agreed that there were no grounds for further inquiry (see section 4).

The law provides for public access to government information, and the government provided access in practice for citizens and noncitizens, including foreign media. Appeals against refusals by government authorities to grant access to materials may be referred to the information committee, three persons appointed to four-year terms by the prime minister. Members of the committee may not be permanent employees of government ministries.

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

A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were cooperative and responsive to their views.

In November 2004 the parliament eliminated direct government funding for the Icelandic Human Rights Center. Funded primarily by the government, but operated as a nongovernmental organization (NGO), the center had acted as the country's leading human rights organization, vetting government legislation and reporting to international treaty monitoring bodies as well as promoting human rights education and research. The new funding mechanism resulted in the center receiving 28 percent of what had previously been allocated by the government for its operations. NGOs, unions, and the city of Reykjavik assisted the center with funding to remain open. Public figures, human rights advocates, and several of the center's European partner institutes unsuccessfully appealed to the parliament to earmark institutional support for the center, arguing that having to apply to the executive branch for individual project grants undermined its independence and disabled it from criticizing the government. In August the CERD encouraged the government to ensure adequate funding of institutions such as the Human Rights Center. In December the COE Human Rights Commissioner urged authorities to ensure that the country would continue to benefit from the services of an independent national human rights institution.

The government cooperated with international organizations and permitted visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

An independent ombudsman, elected by parliament, monitors and reports to national and local authorities to ensure equal protection of persons residing in the country, whether citizens or aliens. Individuals may lodge complaints with the ombudsman regarding decisions, procedures, and conduct of public officials and government agencies. The ombudsman may demand official reports, documents, and records; may summon officials to give testimony; and has access to official premises. He has complained that government agencies were slow to respond to requests for information and documents, causing delays in his handling of cases. By year's end the government had not responded. While the ombudsman's conclusions are not binding on authorities, his recommendations generally were followed. There was also a children's ombudsman (see section 5).

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution provides that everyone shall be equal before the law and enjoy human rights irrespective of gender, race, social status, or language. Various laws implement this principle and the government effectively enforced them.

Women

The law prohibits domestic violence; however, violence against women continued to be a problem. Police statistics indicated that the incidence of violence against women, including rape and sexual assault, was low; however, the number of women seeking medical and counseling assistance indicated that many incidents went unreported. During the year up to 92 women sought temporary lodging at the country's women's shelter, mainly because of domestic violence, and the shelter offered counseling to approximately 465 clients. Also during the year, some 130 individuals sought assistance at the national hospital's rape crisis center.

Women's rights advocates expressed concern that the law makes no distinction between domestic and stranger violence. The Ministry of Justice committee on criminal law proposed to amend the law to exhort judges to take the perpetrator's and victim's intimate relationship into account at the sentencing stage with enhanced punishments for domestic abusers. New legislation had not yet gone before the legislature at year's end. Neither the Ministry of Justice nor the State Prosecutor's Office maintained statistics on prosecutions and convictions for domestic abuse.

The government helped finance various facilities and organizations that provided assistance to victims of violence. The government, in addition to partially funding such services, provided help to immigrant women in abusive relationships, offering emergency accommodation, counseling, and information on legal rights. Courts could issue restraining orders, but there were complaints that the police were reluctant to recommend them and that the courts granted them only in extreme circumstances. Victims of sexual crimes were entitled to lawyers to advise them of their legal rights and help them pursue cases against the alleged assailants; however, a large majority of victims declined to press charges or chose to forgo trial, in part to avoid unwanted publicity. Some local human rights monitors also attributed underreporting to the fact that convictions are rare due to the heavy burden of proof and traditionally yield light sentences. While sentences for domestic violence were gradually increased, the courts still considered precedent in most cases and, therefore, rarely made full use of available leeway under the law. According to statistics from the women's shelter, 12 percent of their clients pressed charges in 2004, up from 7 percent in 2003.

The law criminalizes rape and establishes a maximum penalty of 16 years in prison for the crime. Spousal rape is not explicitly addressed in the law. Judges typically imposed sentences of one to three years in prison. The sexual violence counseling center in Reykjavik has noted that the rate of increase in complaints of rape during the year was higher than the number of convictions. In March the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern that a heavy burden of proof for rape complainants was leading to a low conviction rate.

Although there have been no reported cases of female genital mutilation, in May the government banned it by law.

Prostitution was legal but rare. It was illegal to engage in prostitution as a main source of income or to act as an intermediary in the sale or procurement of sex.

There were concerns that some foreign women were trafficked to work as exotic dancers or in massage parlors where sexual services are offered (see section 5, Trafficking).

The law prohibits sexual harassment and stipulates that violations are punishable by fines; however, the law was not effectively enforced in practice. There was no central authority reporting violations and from which to seek redress, and employers had the freedom to decide whether they will make information regarding sexual harassment available to their employees. While gender equality advocates reported receiving several complaints a year, the charges never became court cases, suggesting that victims are unsure how to proceed with their claims and skeptical as to their reception.

Women enjoy the same rights as men, including under family law, property law, and the judicial system. Despite laws that require equal pay for equal work, a pay gap existed between men and women. According to one of the largest labor unions, during the year women on average earned 14 percent less than men. Additionally, in June a respected business college reported that its female graduates went on to earn up to 50 percent less than their male classmates. Some women's rights activists also expressed concern that only 14 percent of the Supreme Court bar and 24 of 148 professors at the national university were women.

In January the Supreme Court ruled against the municipality of Akureyri in a gender wage discrimination case in which a female department head was paid considerably less than a male counterpart. The court ordered the municipality to pay restitution as well as adjust the woman's salary.

The government funded a center for promoting gender equality to administer the Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men. The center also provided gender equality counseling and education to national and municipal authorities, institutions, companies, individuals, and NGOs. The minister of social affairs appoints a Complaints Committee on Equal Status to adjudicate alleged violations of the act; the committee's rulings are nonreviewable. The minister of social affairs also appoints an Equal Status Council, with nine members drawn from national women's organizations, the University of Iceland, and labor and professional groups, which makes recommendations for equalizing the status of men and women in the labor market.

In December a study sponsored by the Ministry of Education concluded that women receive substantially less television airtime than men and that the gap has increased since this issue was last examined in 1999.

In 2004 the Complaints Committee on Equal Status found that there was demonstrable gender bias in the justice minister's 2003

appointment of a Supreme Court justice where the minister did not provide an adequate explanation for appointing a man instead of a woman. The candidate delayed legal action while her application for another Supreme Court seat was under consideration, but, following the appointment in September 2004 of another male to the court, declared her intention to sue unless she could reach a settlement with the government. In December the woman settled her case in return for a paid year-long leave with the possibility of retiring thereafter.

Children

The government was strongly committed to children's rights and welfare; it funded public education and health care. School attendance is compulsory through the age of 15 and free through public university level. According to the government-funded Agency for Child Protection, approximately 85 percent of students continued to upper secondary education.

The government provided free prenatal and infant medical care, as well as heavily subsidized childcare; girls and boys had equal access.

There were reports of abuse of children during the year. The Agency for Child Protection received 833 reports of abuse cases. While 233 reports were due to emotional abuse, 290 were related to physical abuse and 319 to sexual abuse. The agency operated eight treatment centers and a diagnostic facility for abused and troubled minors. It also coordinated the work of approximately 34 committees throughout the country that were responsible for managing child protection issues (for example, foster care) in their local areas. The local committees hired professionals knowledgeable about sexual abuse.

In an effort to accelerate prosecution of child sexual abuse cases and lessen trauma to the child, the government maintained a Children's Assessment Center (*Barnahus*). During the year, the center conducted 182 investigative interviews, and 125 children underwent assessment and therapy, while 10 medical examinations were performed. The center was intended to create a safe and secure environment where child victims might feel more comfortable talking about what happened to them. It brought together police, prosecutors, judges, doctors, and officials from child protection services. District court judges did not have to use the center and could hold investigatory interviews in the courthouse instead, a practice that concerned some children's rights advocates.

The children's ombudsman, who is appointed by the prime minister but is independent from the government, fulfilled a mandate to protect children's rights, interests, and welfare by, among other things, exerting influence on legislation, government decisions, and public attitudes. When investigating complaints, typically regarding physical and psychological abuse and inadequate accommodations for illnesses and disabilities, the ombudsman had access to all public and private institutions and associations that house children or otherwise care for them; however, the ombudsman's conclusions were not legally binding on parties to disputes.

Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits trafficking in persons; however, there were isolated reports that women were trafficked to the country for exploitation.

The law prohibits trafficking in persons with the aim of sexual abuse or forced labor and provides for imprisonment of up to eight years. During the year police did not charge any persons with trafficking; however, a Chinese citizen won a civil judgment of approximately \$65 thousand (ISK 4 million) when he sued for unpaid wages at a Kopavogur massage parlor. The ministries of justice, foreign affairs, and social affairs were involved in antitrafficking efforts.

Police, airport authorities, and women's aid groups reported that there was evidence of foreign women trafficked to the country, primarily to work in striptease clubs or massage parlors offering sexual services. The larger municipalities have banned private dancing, believed to serve as a front for prostitution and possibly trafficking, but clubs appeared able to circumvent the regulations with impunity. One club in the Reykjavik suburb of Kopavogur, markets private dances on its Web page and in full-page newspaper advertisements that depicted a semi-nude woman reclining on a bed. The Baltic countries were the main region of origin for women working in such clubs and parlors, with others coming from Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. There were no statistics on the number or origin of women actually trafficked. To work as an exotic dancer, any person from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) must first obtain a work permit, which is typically valid for three months. Social workers suspect that most foreign women working in this field come from within the EEA and are thus impossible to track through work permit applications.

Trafficking victims could seek help at the women's shelter, counseling center, and hospital, all of which received government funding. There were no domestic NGOs dedicated solely to assisting victims of trafficking, nor was there an established government assistance program. Some NGOs provided government-supported counseling and shelter to women and children who were victims of violence or sexual abuse. The Human Rights Center and Intercultural Center were also available to assist with trafficking cases and make referrals.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities, and there was no such official discrimination in employment, education, access to health care, or the provision of other state services. The law also provides that persons with disabilities receive preference for a government job when they are at least as qualified as other applicants; however, advocates asserted that common practice and implementation of the law fell short of full implementation to the extent that such persons constitute a majority of the country's poor.

Building regulations require that public accommodations and government buildings, including elevators, be accessible to persons in wheelchairs; that public property managers reserve 1 percent of parking spaces (a minimum of one space) for persons with disabilities; and that, to the extent possible, sidewalks outside the main entrance of such buildings be kept clear of ice and snow. Violations of these regulations are punishable by a fine or a jail sentence of up to two years; however, the main association for persons with disabilities complained that this regulation was not enforced regularly, and authorities rarely assessed penalties for noncompliance.

Some mental health advocates criticized the government for not devoting sufficient attention and resources to the care of persons with mental disabilities. Although the law safeguards their rights, a large number of persons with mental disabilities remained on waiting lists for housing, education, and employment programs. Advocates alleged that government funding for the care of persons with mental disabilities was generally inadequate and that the government-financed health system funded too few hospital places for acute patients and thus exacerbated a shortage of publicly funded preventative and follow-up mental health care.

The Ministry of Social Affairs is the lead government body responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. It coordinates the work of six regional offices that provide services and support persons with disabilities and a diagnostic and advisory center in Reykjavik that aims to create conditions to allow persons with disabilities to lead normal lives.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

While the population remained largely homogeneous, family- and employment-sponsored immigrants were more visible and suffered occasional incidents of harassment based on their race and ethnicity. According to a survey conducted for the country's Red Cross in August, 19 percent of respondents felt immigrants had a positive effect and 5 percent a negative effect.

The minister of social affairs announced in April that the government would establish an Immigrant Council in order to coordinate the work of four ministries and the municipalities on immigrant and refugee issues. The council, set to begin work in early 2006, would be charged with gathering statistical data on immigration; coordinating outreach efforts; distributing information to immigrants; and conducting research on the adaptation process to assist with successful integration.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law allows workers to form and join unions of their choice without previous authorization or excessive requirements; and workers exercised these rights. Labor unions were independent of the government and political parties. Approximately 85 percent of all eligible workers belonged to unions.

The law requires employers to withhold union dues (1 percent of gross pay) from the pay of all employees, whether or not they are union members, to help support disability, strike, and pension funds, and other benefits to which all workers are entitled.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law allows unions to conduct their activities without interference, and the government protected this right in practice. The law allows workers to bargain collectively, and workers exercised this right in practice. Nearly 100 percent of the workforce was covered by collective bargaining agreement. Workers had the right to strike and exercised this right in practice.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

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

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The government effectively implemented laws and policies to protect children from exploitation in the workplace. The law prohibits the employment of children younger than age 16 in factories, on ships, or in other places that are hazardous or require hard labor; this prohibition was observed in practice. Children 14 or 15 years old may be employed part-time or during school vacations in light, nonhazardous occupations. Their work hours must not exceed the ordinary work hours of adults in the same occupation. The administration of occupational safety and health enforced child labor regulations effectively.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The law does not establish a minimum wage, but the minimum wages negotiated in various collectively bargained agreements applied automatically to all employees in those occupations, regardless of union membership. While the agreements can be either industry- or sector-wide, and in some cases firm-specific, the minimum wage levels are occupation-specific. Labor contracts provided a decent standard of living for a worker and family.

The standard legal workweek was 40 hours, which included nearly 3 hours of paid breaks a week. Work exceeding eight hours in a workday must be compensated as overtime. Workers were entitled to 11 hours of rest within each 24-hour period and to a day off every week. Under defined special circumstances, employers may reduce the 11-hour rest period to no less than 8 hours, but they then must compensate workers with 1.5 hours of rest for every hour of reduction. They may also postpone a worker's day off by a week. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration effectively enforced these regulations.

Labor unions criticized the government for not tightening regulations on employment agencies following the expansion of the EEA agreement

in 2004. The expanded agreement has allowed large numbers of foreign workers, particularly in construction, to work in the country through service agreements for very low wages and without official monitoring. The unions argued that the employment agencies regularly disregarded worker rights, failed to observe collective bargaining agreements and labor legislation, and often failed to pay fees and taxes in accordance with the law. In September, to better enforce labor laws for foreign workers, the unions formally urged the government to enact legislation ensuring that employers and employees would have a direct relationship without any role for intermediaries such as employment agencies.

The legislature set health and safety standards, and the Ministry of Social Affairs administered and enforced them through its administration of occupational safety and health, which could close workplaces until they met safety and health standards. Workers had a collective, but not individual, right to refuse to work at a job that did not meet occupational safety and health criteria. It is illegal to fire workers who report unsafe or unhealthy conditions.

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