



2008 Human Rights Report: Iceland

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

[2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#)

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Iceland, with a population of 320,000, is a constitutional parliamentary republic. The president is the head of state; a prime minister, usually the head of the majority party, is head of government. There is a unicameral parliament (Althingi). In June incumbent President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson ran unopposed for reelection, as is traditional. Parliamentary elections in 2007 were free and fair. The country's multiparty government was headed by Prime Minister Geir Haarde. 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. Reported human rights problems included some societal discrimination against minorities and foreigners, including refugees and asylum seekers, violence against women, and reports of women trafficked to and through 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 constitution and law prohibit such practices, and there were no reports that government officials employed them.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions generally met international standards, and the government permitted visits by independent human rights observers.

During the year media expressed concern regarding overcrowding at Reykjavik's main pretrial detention facility and at the main prison at Litla-Hraun. When overcrowding in the main facility occurred, pretrial detainees were held in local police station jails. During renovation work at the Akureyri prison, inmates were kept at Litla-Hraun, resulting in temporary double occupancy of single-prisoner cells in some cases.

The government maintained a separate minimum security prison for female inmates; however, because so few women were incarcerated (five or six on average) some men were also held there. Men housed in facilities with women were closely monitored and only interacted with women in the common areas; they did not share cellblocks. Juvenile offenders were generally held in facilities run and supervised by the Government Agency for Child Protection. In rare instances, however, they were incarcerated and held with adults, since there was no separate facility for juveniles in the prison system. In circumstances where pretrial detainees did not need to be placed in solitary confinement, they were held together with convicted prisoners.

The government permitted visits by independent human rights observers during the year. Prisoners could, and did, request visits from volunteers from the Icelandic Red Cross, or "prisoners' friends." The volunteers talked with the prisoners and provided them with second hand clothes upon request. There were no prison visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross during the year.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

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

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the police (the country's only security force), and the government had effective mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse and corruption. There were no reports of impunity involving the police during the year.

Arrest and Detention

Police may make arrests under a number of circumstances: when they believe a prosecutable offense has been committed; where necessary to prevent further offenses or destruction of evidence; to protect a suspect; or when a person refuses to obey police orders to move. Arrest warrants are usually not required; the criminal code explicitly requires warrants only for arrests when individuals fail to present themselves in court to attend a hearing or a trial, or to prison to serve a sentence.

Persons placed under arrest are entitled to legal counsel, which is provided by the government if they are indigent. Authorities must inform persons under arrest of their rights and must bring them before a judge within 24 hours. The judge determines whether a suspect must remain in custody during the investigation; the judge may grant conditional release, subject to assurances that the accused will appear for trial.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence in practice.

Trial Procedures

The constitution provides for the right to a fair trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right.

Courts do not use juries, but multijudge panels are common, particularly on the Supreme Court. Defendants are entitled to a presumption of innocence and courts generally tried cases 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 are required to 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 obtained illegally. Defendants have the right to appeal, and the Supreme Court handles appeals expeditiously.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

A single court system handles both criminal and civil matters. The two levels of the judiciary--the district courts and the Supreme Court--were considered independent and impartial in civil matters. Lawsuits may be brought seeking damages for, or cessation of, a human rights violation.

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

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

In May the parliament amended the law on foreigners, permitting a partner or a spouse 24 years old or younger to obtain a residence permit based on marriage to a citizen or the holder of a residence permit. The law requires authorities to ensure that the marriage or partnership was not entered into solely for the purpose of obtaining a residence permit. Both individuals must also have entered into the marriage or partnership freely, and the marriage or partnership must not be in breach of the law. This legal change addressed concerns raised by the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance that the previous law (which banned marriage-based residence permits for those 24 years of age and younger) interfered with family reunification.

Immigration law allows authorities to conduct house searches without a prior court order when there is a significant risk that delay would jeopardize an investigation of immigration fraud. In September police searched the temporary residence of asylum seekers in Reykjanesbaer after obtaining a court order. The police conducted the search on the suspicion that some asylum seekers were withholding information pertinent to their asylum requests. Immigration authorities were still processing their findings at the end of the year but made comments to media that police findings during the raid supported suspicions of immigration fraud. The asylum seekers staying in the temporary residence, some media representatives, and some human rights observers said the police search was an example of societal discrimination against asylum seekers. There were no allegations that the police used physical force in the operation.

Immigration law allows authorities to request DNA tests without court supervision in cases where they suspect immigration fraud. In practice no DNA tests took place during the year.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respected these rights in practice. Individuals could criticize the government publicly or privately without reprisal.

The law establishes fines and imprisonment of up to three months for persons convicted of publicly deriding or

belittling the religious doctrines of a lawful religious association active in the country. The law also establishes fines and imprisonment of up to two years for anyone who publicly ridicules, slanders, insults, threatens, or in any other manner publicly assaults a person or a group on the basis of their nationality, skin color, race, religion, or sexual orientation. There were no reports that the law was invoked during the year.

The independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views without restriction.

Internet Freedom

There were no government restrictions on access to the Internet or reports that the government monitored e-mail or Internet chat rooms. Individuals and groups could engage in the peaceful expression of views via the Internet, including by e-mail. Eighty-eight percent of homes had Internet access, and 91 percent of citizens used the Internet.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

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

c. Freedom of Religion

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respected this right in practice. The state financially supported and promoted the official religion, Lutheranism. Other religions did not receive equal treatment in school curricula (grades 1-10) or comparable subsidies for their faith-based activities.

The law specifies conditions and procedures that religious organizations other than the state church must follow to be registered by the government and to be eligible for 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. During the year, the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs approved the registration of one religious organization, and another registration application was under review at year's end.

All citizens 16 years of age and older pay an annual church tax of 10,344 krona (approximately \$86). 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 ethical humanists objected to having their fees go to the university, asserting that this was inconsistent with the right of freedom of association.

In July the European Court of Human Rights agreed to take up the Icelandic Pagan Association's (Asatruarfelagid) case for receiving funding proportional to its membership from monies currently made available only to the national church. The association's request had previously been rejected by the Supreme Court.

In September the city of Reykjavik awarded the Icelandic Buddhist Movement a plot of land to build a temple. In November 2007 the city approved a detailed land use plan that included a plot of land available for the construction of a Russian Orthodox church. However, the new plan was not implemented during the year and construction did

not begin. Architectural delays during the year temporarily halted construction of The Pagan Association's place of worship.

The long-pending application to the Reykjavik city planning commission for land to build a mosque encountered further delay late in the year, in part because of uncertainty over which of two groups was the appropriate representative of the Muslim community.

The law mandates religious instruction "shaped by the Christian heritage of Icelandic culture" in the public schools, although the curriculum also included instruction on other religions. Students may be exempted from attending the classes upon parental request.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The Jewish community numbered fewer than 100 individuals; there were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

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 religion. The law also establishes fines and imprisonment of up to three months for publicly deriding or belittling the religious doctrines of a lawful religious association active in the country. Although members of the Muslim Association complained publicly about broadcasts of a Christian television station, Omega TV, the law was not invoked during the year.

For a more detailed discussion, see the 2008 International Religious Freedom Report at www.state.gov/g/drl/irf/rpt.

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

The constitution provides for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights in practice. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of interest.

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 the expulsion or return of refugees to countries where their lives or freedom would be threatened. The government granted refugee status or asylum, but had no fixed refugee acceptance requirements. In February 2007 the government decided to double its refugee admissions to 25 refugees every year, instead of every other year.

Asylum seekers were eligible for government subsidized health care during the processing of their cases, which at times took three years or more. They could enroll their children in public schools after being in the country for three months, and some children of asylum seekers were enrolled in public schools during the year. Asylum seekers could also obtain work permits.

Officials rejected most asylum applications and eventually deported most applicants. During the year, a family of four asylum seekers was accepted as political refugees after the closure of the Icelandic- and Norwegian-run monitoring mission in Sri Lanka. At least six other asylum seekers' claims were technically denied, but they were

given permanent residence permits as a humanitarian exception.

The law allows for accelerated refusal of applications deemed to be "manifestly unfounded." The minister of justice appoints the director of immigration, who also heads the adjudicating body for asylum cases. Some observers asserted that this arrangement could constitute a conflict of interest.

Human rights advocates criticized the law for not specifying which "significant human rights reasons" must underpin granting temporary residence (and eligibility for work permits) while asylum cases are processed, arguing that the situation created the possible appearance of arbitrary decisions. Observers noted that the law was ambiguous about the criteria for granting and denying asylum, and this ambiguity, combined with the small number of approved asylum applications, left unclear what considerations were applied in adjudicating the applications of asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers had no access to the court system. They could appeal denials only to the Ministry of Justice.

In April the government responded to concerns expressed by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in 2005 about reports that border guards at times improperly handled asylum requests. The government said it was not aware of the cases to which the CERD referred, and that Icelandic border guards received satisfactory training and education on refugee and asylum issues.

In July a report by the UN Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) expressed concern over reported inappropriate handling of incidents by law enforcement officers and border guards, for example at airports and detention centers. The CPT report provided no specifics concerning the reported incidents.

In July police carried out a deportation order from the Directorate of Immigration and deported a Kenyan asylum seeker to Italy without ruling on the merits of his claim. The government's action was criticized by advocates for asylum seekers, who argued that the government should have first ruled on the merits of his claim as provided by the Dublin Convention, and that the asylum seeker had sufficient ties to Iceland that the government should adjudicate his claim. In August the minister of justice overturned the Directorate of Immigration decision and ordered the directorate to evaluate the basis of the Kenyan's asylum claim. The directorate was processing the case at year's end.

In September asylum seekers and their advocates criticized police conduct following an unannounced 7:00 a.m. raid on the government-run group home for asylum seekers in Reykjanesbaer. They alleged that police conduct and subsequent comments by officials were examples of societal prejudice against asylum seekers.

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

The constitution provides citizens the right to change their government peacefully, and citizens exercised this right in practice through periodic, free, and fair elections based on universal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

During the year incumbent President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson was re-elected by default, as no other candidate ran against him. Since there was no opposition candidate, the presidential election scheduled for June 28 was cancelled. Parliamentary elections in May 2007 were free and fair.

There were 23 women in the 63-seat parliament and four women in the 12 member cabinet. Two of nine Supreme Court members and 14 of 40 district court judges were women. No members of minority groups held seats in the

parliament or in the cabinet.

Government Corruption and Transparency

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, and the government generally implemented these laws effectively. In December the parliament passed a law creating the office of a special prosecutor to investigate allegations of public and private corruption related to the collapse of the country's three largest banks in October.

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 an information committee consisting of three persons appointed by the prime minister. Permanent employees of government ministries may not be members of the committee. Public officials were not subject to financial disclosure laws.

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.

The Icelandic Human Rights Center was the leading human rights organization, vetting government legislation, reporting to international treaty monitoring bodies, and promoting human rights education and research. The center was funded primarily by the government but also by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), unions, and the city of Reykjavik; it operated as an NGO.

An independent ombudsman, elected by parliament, monitored and reported to national and local authorities on human rights developments to ensure that all residents, whether or not they were citizens, received equal protection. Individuals could 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. Government agencies generally responded to the ombudsman's requests for information and documents within a reasonable timeframe, but the ombudsman noted in previous years that some government agencies responded slowly to requests, causing delays in the handling of cases. The government has never directly responded to these complaints. While the ombudsman's recommendations are not binding on authorities, they are generally adopted.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, and social status. Various laws implement these principles, and the government effectively enforced them.

Women

Rape carries a maximum penalty of 16 years in prison. Judges typically imposed sentences of one to three years. Spousal rape is not explicitly addressed in the law. In previous years, the Icelandic Counseling and Information Center for Survivors of Sexual Violence (Stigamot) noted that the number of reported rapes consistently rose faster than the number of convictions for rape. According to national police statistics, there were 87 reported rapes in 2007. In that year prosecutors brought charges in 27 percent of sexual assault cases, and district courts convicted 17 of 19 defendants. During the year activists continued to express concern that the burden of proof in rape cases was too heavy and led to a low conviction rate. The government did not respond formally to these complaints.

The law prohibits domestic violence; however, violence against women continued to be a problem. Police statistics indicated that the incidence of reported 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 127 women sought temporary lodging at the country's shelter for women, mainly because of domestic violence. The shelter offered 420 counseling sessions to 210 clients. Also during the year, 106 women sought assistance at the National Hospital's Rape Crisis Center.

The law permits judges to increase the sentences of persons who committed violence against persons with whom they had a domestic relationship or other close bond. However, there were no domestic violence cases in which judges actually handed down stronger sentences, and one respected activist expressed concern that sentences appeared to be getting milder. Neither the Ministry of Justice nor the Office of the State Prosecutor maintained specific statistics on prosecutions and convictions for domestic abuse.

The government helped finance Stigamot, the Women's Shelter, the rape crisis center of the National Hospital, and other organizations that provided assistance to victims of domestic or gender-based violence. In addition to partially funding such services, the government provided help to immigrant women in abusive relationships, offering emergency accommodation, counseling, and information on legal rights. Courts could issue restraining orders. However, advocates expressed concern that such orders were ineffective because the court system took too long to issue the orders and courts granted them only in extreme circumstances. Victims of sex crimes were entitled to lawyers to advise them of their 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 publicity. Some local human rights monitors also attributed underreporting to the infrequency of convictions because of the heavy burden of proof and to traditionally light sentences. For the few cases of domestic violence that end up in court, the courts continued in many cases to base sentences on precedent and rarely made full use of the more stringent sentencing authority available under the law. According to statistics from the Women's Shelter, 20 percent of its clients pressed charges during the year, up from 15 percent in 2007.

In October the Ministry of Social Affairs conducted a survey to gauge the extent of violence against women nationwide. The survey was part of the action plan for reducing domestic and sexual violence against women and children during the years 2006-11. Survey results were not available at year's end.

Prostitution is legal but was rare. Prostitution became legal in 2007 but the law prohibits its advertisement. The law also makes it illegal for a third party, or pimp, to profit from prostitution or procurement of sex, or for a person to rent facilities for prostitution.

Authorities had some success restricting the number and operations of strip clubs in the Reykjavik Metropolitan Area--the predominant locus of prostitution and human trafficking cases.

The general penal code prohibits sexual harassment and stipulates that violations are punishable by imprisonment. The law on equal status defines sexual harassment more broadly. Thus plaintiffs could report incidents to the Complaints Committee on Equal Status and seek redress under the law on equal status. The law required employers and organization supervisors to make specific arrangements to prevent employees, students, and clients from becoming victims of gender-based or sexual harassment. However, employers were not required to provide their employees with information on the legal prohibitions against sexual harassment in the workplace. As in previous years, gender equality advocates reported receiving several complaints during the year; there were two court cases, and one guilty verdict.

Women enjoy the same legal rights as men, including under family law, property law, and in the judicial system. However, despite laws that require equal pay for equal work, a pay gap existed between men and women.

According to a 2007 study commissioned by the Union of Public Servants, female public servants on average earned 27 percent less than men. A study the previous year commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs found an average 15 percent pay gap between men and women in the same professions.

Affirmative action provisions in the law state that if women are underrepresented in a certain profession, employers have an obligation to hire female candidates over equally qualified male candidates.

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 members of a Complaints Committee on Equal Status, which adjudicates alleged violations of the act, and appoints an Equal Status Council, with members drawn from national women's organizations, the University of Iceland, and labor and professional groups; the council makes recommendations for equalizing the status of men and women in the workplace.

During the year the Complaints Committee on Equal Status decided nine cases. In one case, the committee found that the regional office for disability issues in Western Iceland breached the law on equal status when it hired a man instead of a more qualified woman as director of a job program for persons with disabilities. The committee directed the offending office to find a solution acceptable to the complainant.

In May the parliament amended the immigration law to permit individuals from countries outside the European Economic Area to retain their residence permits upon divorce from Icelandic-born spouses in circumstances where abuse or violence was perpetrated on the foreign spouse or the spouse's child.

Children

The government was strongly committed to children's rights and welfare.

There were reports of abuse of children during the year. In 2007 the Agency for Child Protection received 1,586 reports of abuse, including 705 reports of emotional abuse, 462 of physical abuse, and 436 of sexual abuse. The agency operated four treatment centers and a diagnostic facility for abused and troubled minors and coordinated the work of 31 committees throughout the country that were responsible for managing child protection issues in their local areas. The local committees hired professionals with expertise in sexual abuse.

The government maintained a children's assessment center to accelerate prosecution of child sexual abuse cases and lessen the trauma experienced by the child. During the year, the center conducted 252 investigative interviews, provided assessment of and therapy to 235 children, and performed 27 medical examinations. 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. After an interview with a child, the assessment center could analyze the possible effects of the sexual abuse on the child and family. The Agency for Child Protection can also provide advice to parents. District court judges were not required to use the center, however, and could hold investigatory interviews in the courthouse instead, a practice that troubled some children's rights advocates. In practice the Reykjavik District Court opted not to use the center's services, maintaining that the court had sufficient expertise in-house to provide the same services.

The children's ombudsman, who is appointed by the prime minister but acts independently of the government, fulfilled her mandate to protect children's rights, interests, and welfare by, among other things, seeking to influence legislation, government decisions, and public attitudes. When investigating complaints, which typically involved

physical and psychological abuse and inadequate accommodation for children with illnesses or 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. The ombudsman was not empowered to intervene in individual cases but could investigate them for indications of a general trend. The ombudsman could also initiate cases at her discretion.

Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits trafficking in persons with the aim of sexual abuse or forced labor, and provides for imprisonment of up to eight years for such offenses. During the year police did not charge any persons with trafficking; however, there were reports that persons were trafficked to and through the country.

Cases fell into several categories, none of which included more than a few documented victims: undocumented Asian and eastern European workers in construction and manufacturing who were underpaid and forced to live in substandard employer-provided housing; "mail-order" or "Internet" brides from eastern Europe and Asia trapped with abusive husbands, with some reports of forced prostitution; and underpaid or mistreated prostitutes and workers in nightclubs and massage parlors. In March labor authorities and union representatives reported that a Chinese restaurant in Reykjavik was suspected of having trafficked several of its kitchen staff to the country. The restaurant was investigated for labor code violations and subsequently closed. No prosecutions resulted. The Directorate of Labor investigated other cases throughout the year involving undocumented workers who were potentially victims of trafficking. In some cases employers were fined for noncompliance with labor laws but none were charged with trafficking.

The Ministry of Social Affairs has primary responsibility for efforts to prevent and punish trafficking; the ministries of justice and of foreign affairs were also involved in antitrafficking efforts. A government working group charged with developing the country's first national action plan on trafficking in persons held regular meetings during the year, but had not finished drafting the action plan by year's end.

Women's aid groups reported evidence that foreign women were trafficked to the country to work in strip clubs or massage parlors offering sexual services. During the year some municipalities banned private clubs that featured dancing, believed to serve as a front for prostitution and possible trafficking. The Baltic countries were the main countries 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 trafficked.

Although the government made efforts during the year to target elements of the sex industry allegedly linked to trafficking, there was no coordinated government effort to investigate trafficking outside of the general context of increased efforts to combat organized crime, and no public officials were specifically designated to prosecute trafficking cases.

In January 2007 the government formed an antitrafficking working group with representatives of the Ministry of Justice, law enforcement bodies, and NGOs. The group's mission was to monitor and coordinate actions to combat trafficking by improving the flow of information through direct communications channels between government institutions and NGOs. The working group also sought to improve conditions for the rehabilitation and repatriation of trafficking victims. The working group reported to the European Women's Lobby, an umbrella organization of women's associations in the European Union. Working group members reported that during the year border police were better prepared to identify possible trafficking victims and to inform them about government institutions and NGOs offering victim services. Members encouraged potential trafficking victims to contact the police. Members of the working group contributed to the Ministry of Social Affairs effort to draft an antitrafficking action plan.

The government provided funding for various organizations whose services included assistance to victims of trafficking; however, there was no established government assistance program specifically for victims of trafficking.

The State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons Report can be found at www.state.gov/g/tip.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities, and there were no reports of 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 government jobs when they are at least as qualified as other applicants; however, disability rights advocates asserted that the law was not fully implemented, and that persons with disabilities constituted 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 sidewalks outside the main entrance of such buildings be kept clear of ice and snow to the extent possible. 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 authorities rarely, if ever, assessed penalties for noncompliance.

During the year, the government initiated several projects included in its action plan for 2006-10 to strengthen services for those with mental disabilities. The Ministry of Social Welfare purchased or rented several dozen facilities which were converted into apartments and group homes, and provided grants to local community governments and NGOs to support vocational training and other services.

The Ministry of Social Affairs was the lead government body responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. It coordinated the work of six regional offices that provided services and support to persons with disabilities. It also maintained a diagnostic and advisory center in Reykjavik that aimed to create conditions allowing persons with disabilities to lead normal lives.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Immigrants, mainly persons from eastern European and the Baltic states, stood out from the largely homogeneous population and suffered occasional incidents of harassment based on their ethnicity.

In June the parliament approved an action plan drafted by the Immigrant Council to implement an immigrant integration policy drafted by the council in January 2007. The overall goal of the policy was to improve the reception of foreign immigrants, and facilitate their integration into Icelandic society, while maintaining their native culture.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal violence or discrimination based on sexual orientation.

There were no reports of societal violence or discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law allows workers to form and join independent 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 80 percent of all eligible workers belonged to unions. Workers had the right to strike and exercised this right in practice.

The law requires employers to withhold union dues (1 percent of gross pay) from all employees, regardless of their union status, to help support disability, strike, and pension funds, and to finance 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 agreements. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination and employer interference in union functions and the government protected this right.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, including by children; however, there were reports that a small number of women were trafficked for sexual exploitation and Asian and eastern European men were trafficked for labor in construction and manufacturing.

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 work 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, or in some cases firm specific, the negotiated wage levels are occupation specific. Labor contracts provided a decent standard of living for a worker and family.

The standard legal workweek is 40 hours, including nearly three 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 special defined circumstances, employers may reduce the 11 hour rest period to no less than eight hours, but they then must compensate workers with one and a half 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.

There were indications that undocumented foreign workers--primarily men--in the booming construction sector were exploited by being underpaid and denied medical coverage, and were required to work long hours while living

in substandard housing or even sleeping at building sites. Most sources stressed that the men willingly worked illegally to earn up to four times the amount they might have expected in their East European or Baltic home countries. Media and labor organizations continued to report that some immigrant workers were paid wages well below the union mandated minimum. Deteriorating economic conditions and an unfavorable exchange rate for remittances caused a steep decline in the immigrant labor population towards the end of the year.

The legislature sets health and safety standards, and the Ministry of Social Affairs administers and enforces them through its administration of occupational safety and health. The ministry can close workplaces that fail to meet safety and health standards. Workers have a collective, but not individual, right to refuse to work at a job that does not meet occupational safety and health criteria. It is illegal to fire workers because they report unsafe or unhealthy conditions.