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Sweden

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

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Sweden, with a population of approximately nine million, is a constitutional monarchy with a multiparty, parliamentary form of government. The last national elections, held in 2002, were free and fair. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) has controlled the government for 64 of the past 73 years. The king is the largely symbolic head of state. The prime minister is the head of the government and exercises executive authority. 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 dealing with individual instances of abuse. The following human rights problems were reported:

- anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic incidents
- violence against women and children
- trafficking in women and children
- societal discrimination against foreign-born residents, Roma, and homosexuals

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; however, there were isolated reports that government officials employed them.

In May a court convicted two police officers for assault and excessive violence against a 64-year-old man. The court sentenced each of the officers to three-months' imprisonment and dismissed them from the police force. In September authorities initiated investigations against three police officers accused of use of excessive violence during a confrontation near Stockholm in September. The investigations were ongoing at year's end.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

While prison conditions generally met international standards, overcrowding and lengthy pretrial detention periods remained problems, particularly in the Stockholm region. The Council for Europe's (COE) Committee for the Prevention of Torture, in a 2004 report, stated authorities should work to assure a proper balance between the needs of criminal investigations and the restrictions placed upon pretrial detainees. It recommended that pretrial detainees be given the right of appeal against court decisions to maintain specific restrictions, such as limitations on visits, telephone calls, association, and censorship of correspondence.

The government permitted visits by independent human rights observers, although there were no such visits during the year.

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

There is a national-level police force divided into 12 districts, each of which reports to a national police board under jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice. There were no reports of corruption or of problems related to impunity. In January, the office of the prosecutor general established a unit exclusively dedicated to investigations of crimes committed by police officers, judges, and prosecutors.

Arrest and Detention

The law requires warrants issued by duly authorized officials for arrests, and the government generally respected this requirement in practice. Police must file charges within 6 hours against persons detained for disturbing the public order or considered dangerous, and within 12 hours against those detained on other grounds. Police may hold a person for questioning for 6 hours, although the period may be extended to 12 hours if necessary for the investigation. If the person is a suspect, police must decide whether to arrest or release the person. If the suspect is arrested, the prosecutor has 24 hours (or three days in exceptional circumstances) to request detention. An arrested suspect must be arraigned within 48 hours, and initial prosecution must begin within 2 weeks, unless extenuating circumstances exist, and authorities generally respected these requirements. Detainees may request a lawyer of their choice or if indigent, the court will appoint one. Detainees are afforded prompt access to lawyers, as well as to family members. Although there is no system of bail, police routinely released defendants pending trial, unless they were considered dangerous. In criminal cases, the government is obligated to provide an attorney if the defendant cannot afford one.

There were no reports of political detainees.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

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

The judicial system is composed of three levels: district courts, a court of appeals, and the Supreme Court. All cases are heard first in a district court regardless of the severity of the alleged crime. For some areas, there are independent specialized courts, such as the labor court, that are usually the second and last instance for trial after the district court. Other specialized courts, for areas such as water and real estate, depend on the district courts; lawsuits at these courts may be appealed to the Supreme Court.

Trial Procedures

All trials are public. Juries are used only in cases involving freedom of the press or freedom of speech. In other cases judges or court-appointed civilian representatives make determinations of guilt or innocence. The court system distinguishes between civil and criminal cases. Defendants have the right to be present at their trial and to consult with an attorney in a timely manner. In criminal cases, the government is obligated to provide a defense attorney if the defendant cannot afford one. A "free evidence" system allows parties to present in court any evidence, regardless of how it has been acquired. Defendants enjoy a presumption of innocence and have a right of appeal.

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; however, human rights organizations, including the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, expressed concern over increased use of surveillance techniques by the police and insufficient protection of the individual's right to privacy. In 2004 the government created a public representative position within the prosecutor's office to protect citizens' rights in court cases involving use of invasive measures, such as camera surveillance or wiretapping.

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.

The law on hate speech prohibits threats or expressions of contempt for a national, ethnic, or other such group of persons with allusion to race, color, national or ethnic origin, religious belief, or sexual orientation. In 2004 a district court convicted Pentecostal Pastor Ake Green for violation of the hate speech law. Green challenged the verdict on the basis of freedom of speech, and in February an appeals court ruled in Green's favor and overturned the conviction. In March the prosecutor general appealed the state's case against Green to the Supreme Court. In November the Supreme Court upheld the appeals court ruling and acquitted Pastor Green (see section 2.c.).

Authorities used the hate speech law to prohibit neo-Nazi groups from displaying signs and banners with provocative symbols at their rallies (see section 5).

An active and independent media expressed a wide variety of views without restriction; there were no government restrictions on access to the Internet or academic freedom.

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 Swedish Commission for State Grants to Religious Communities financed 37 religious groups in 2004; the vast majority was Christian churches, and the remainder was four Islamic organizations and the Jewish community. In April the government added the Swedish Buddhist Cooperation Council to the list of religious organizations entitled to state grants; it is the first non-Abrahamic religion to receive such recognition.

In 2004 a district court convicted Pentecostal Pastor Åke Green for violation of the hate speech law. Green's conviction resulted from a sermon in which he condemned homosexuality, in part on the basis of biblical teachings. In March an appeals court overturned the conviction. The government has appealed the appeals court decision to the Supreme Court. In November the Supreme Court upheld the appeals court decision in favor of Pastor Green, citing freedom of religion and freedom of expression rights guaranteed in the European Convention on Human Rights (see section 2.a.).

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Anti-Muslim incidents appeared to have increased during the past few years. For example, in separate incidents in September and October unidentified individuals threw firebombs into the Islamic Center's mosque in the city of Malmö; an arson attack had extensively destroyed the same mosque in 2003. The perpetrators of these incidents have not been identified. The Malmö mosque reported it frequently received anonymous threats. Stockholm's largest mosque also reported frequently receiving anonymous threats. In September an imam at the Stockholm mosque stated that fellow Muslims threatened him for his condemnation of terrorism. The office of the ombudsman against ethnic discrimination confirmed that a number of Muslim women reported incidents where they believed that they have been discriminated against because they wore headscarves.

In November Swedish Radio (SR) reported that 4 of 10 Muslim organizations in the country have been threatened, according to an investigation by a SR news program, which interviewed 100 organizations that together represent 80 thousand Muslims. The report said that 3 of 10 organizations have been attacked, vandalized, and damaged. Abuse ranged from graffiti to attacks with fire bombs.

In September the Swedish integration board released survey results that suggested two-thirds of citizens do not view some values within Islam as compatible with fundamental societal values. For example, 37 percent of respondents opposed the building of mosques in the country, and 53 percent opposed the wearing of headscarves in the workplace by Muslim women.

The Jehovah's Witnesses and members of various smaller Christian churches reported incidents of discrimination during the past few years.

The Jewish community numbered approximately 18,500 to 20,000 persons. According to police statistics, reported anti-Semitic hate crimes increased towards the end of the 1990s and has averaged approximately 130 annually since 2000. In 2004 reported anti-Semitic crimes increased by 44 percent over the previous year. During 2004 police reported 151 anti-Semitic crimes, of these, 7 were classified as assaults, 66 as agitation against an ethnic group, and 47 as unlawful threat or harassment. In July unidentified persons smashed gravestones at a Jewish cemetery in Stockholm. Judisk Sakerhet Sverige, a private security organization for Jewish congregations in Sweden, cited anonymous telephone threats and letters as problems Jewish persons encountered. Lack of evidence generally precluded police prosecution of such cases.

The Living History Forum, a governmental body, conducts research on the country's role during the Holocaust and on its connections to Nazi Germany. During the year the Forum sponsored educational projects, lectures, seminars, and exhibitions throughout the country. The Forum also conducted Holocaust awareness projects in the nearby countries of Estonia and Latvia.

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 also provided temporary protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 protocol, and provided it to approximately 469 persons during the year.

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees.

Applications for asylum could remain under consideration for long periods of time with applicants in uncertain status. The appeals process in the courts may extend cases for several years.

The government returned asylum seekers from European Union (EU) countries or from countries with which it maintained reciprocal-return agreements. In most cases, persons returned had passed through or had asylum determinations pending in other EU countries. In many cases, authorities deported asylum seekers within 72 hours of arrival. Human rights organizations expressed concern that some asylum cases were adjudicated too quickly.

The UN Committee against Torture (UNCPT) received eight new cases against the government during the year, all of which concerned denial of applications for political asylum and consequent repatriations to countries where victims allegedly faced a risk of torture. During the year, UNCPT ruled on seven cases and found that in two cases the country had violated the rights of the petitioners. The UNCPT dismissed one case.

In June the UNCPT found that the country had violated the UN Convention against Torture in connection with the forced repatriation of two Egyptian nationals in 2001. In September a parliamentary committee for government oversight criticized the government for its handling of the Egyptian repatriation case. The committee investigation determined that the government should not have accepted nontorture guarantees provided by the government of Egypt. The committee also criticized the government for its failure to document its contacts with the police on this matter. Also related to this incident, a parliamentary ombudsman investigation (initiated in 2004 and concluded in March) found that the police acted improperly by allowing authorities of another country to take charge of the Egyptian nationals while they were still in the country.

In May the government stopped the repatriation of an Azeri family at the request of the UNCPT. The migration board was further investigating the case. The Swedish Helsinki Committee, a human rights NGO, criticized the lack of an appeals process for individuals subject to repatriation for national security reasons.

In July a new law for the protection of individual (unaccompanied) children seeking asylum entered into force. Under the law the government appoints a legal guardian to such children upon their arrival.

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

The law provides citizens 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

Elections to the 349-member unicameral parliament are held every 4 years. The last elections, held in September 2002, were free and fair. The SDP has dominated the political system for the past seven decades, and SDP members occupied a disproportionately large number of publicly appointed positions. The Swedish Trade Union Confederation continued to provide significant financial and organizational support to the SDP.

There were 158 women in the 349-seat parliament and 11 women in the 22-member cabinet.

The law prohibits the government from holding information about the racial or ethnic background of its citizens; therefore, no statistics on minority participation in the parliament are available. However, there were four members of minorities in the 22-member cabinet (one of Turkish-Assyrian origin, one of Estonian origin, one of Latvian origin, and one Jewish member).

Government Corruption and Transparency

There were isolated reports of government corruption during the year. In October media reported that an investigation by tax authorities found that bookkeeping irregularities of a soccer team with links to a cabinet minister resulted in the nonpayment of some taxes during the 2000-2004 period. The soccer team was obliged to pay the back taxes. In November privacy laws that precluded scrutiny of political party-membership lists led authorities to abandon an investigation into allegations of embezzlement of public funds by the Social Democratic Youth league, which is associated with the ruling Social Democratic Party. In December the Stockholm county court convicted 14 store managers of the state-owned alcohol distribution monopoly for having received bribes from suppliers.

The law provides for public access to government information, and the government generally respected this in practice. The public has the right to access government documents unless they were are subject to secrecy laws, according to which information may be withheld if its release posed a threat to national security or individual or corporate privacy.

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 restrictions, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were very cooperative and responsive to their views.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, or social status; violence against women and children, trafficking in persons, and discrimination against foreigner residents, Roma, and homosexuals were problems.

Women

Violence against women remained a problem. The National Council for Crime Prevention (NCCP) reported 20,198 cases of assault against women as of the end of November. Most involved spousal abuse. An average 20 to 30 murders of women and girls were reported each year, half of them by men closely related to the victim. Authorities apprehended and prosecuted abusers. The typical sentence for abuse was a prison term (3 to 15 months on average) or psychiatric treatment.

The law provides victims with protection from contact with their abusers. When necessary, authorities helped women obtain new identities and homes. Both national and local governments helped fund volunteer groups that provided shelter and other assistance to abused women, and both private and public organizations ran shelters and operated hotlines.

Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal. The law stipulates higher sanctions for repeated crimes if the perpetrator had a close relationship to the victim. The NCCP reported 1,912 (as of end of November) rapes of persons over age 14, compared with 2,141 in for the same period in 2004. The law provides that rape may be prosecuted as sexual assault, based on a determination of the level of resistance offered by the victim. At year's end authorities estimated that approximately two thousand women had been exposed to honor-related violence. Immigrants from Muslim countries appeared to be more at risk than other women. The government provided protected housing for young women vulnerable to honor-related violence from family members.

The law prohibits female genital mutilation (FGM). During the year there were no reports of FGM in the country, but there are nearly 30 thousand women from countries in which FGM is practiced. The practice of FGM is a felony punishable by up to 10 years' imprisonment.

Prostitution is legal; however, the purchase of sexual services is illegal. Prostitutes were not arrested but their clients were. The government has sought to curb prostitution by focusing on the demand rather than the supply side. Both government and nongovernmental sources asserted that the law has proven effective in limiting prostitution and trafficking in persons.

Trafficking in women was a problem (see section 5, Trafficking).

The law prohibits sexual harassment, and the government generally enforced this law in practice. Employers who do not investigate and intervene against harassment at work may be obliged to pay damages to the victim.

Women enjoy the same rights as men, including rights under family law, property law, and in the judicial system. But some sectors of the labor market still showed significant gender disparities. During the year women's salaries averaged 85 percent of men's salaries, adjusting for age, education, and occupational differences.

The equal opportunity ombudsman (EEO), a public official, investigates complaints of gender discrimination in the labor market. Complaints may also be filed with the courts or with the employer, with mediation by the employee's labor union. During the year the EEO's office registered 170 cases. Women filed approximately 80 percent of the cases, 39 percent of which concerned salaries. The number of discrimination complaints related to pregnancy increased to 35, compared with 19 in 2004.

Children

The government was strongly committed to children's rights and welfare; it amply funded systems of public education and medical care. The government provided compulsory, free, and universal education for children ages 9 to 16, but public schooling was provided until age 18. Nearly 100 percent of school-aged children attended school, and the highest level achieved by most children was completion of high school.

The government also provided free medical care for all children up to the age of 16, and boys and girls had equal access.

Child abuse was a problem. As of the end of November, the NCCP reported 6,513 cases of abuse of children under the age of 15. As of the end of November, police reported 537 cases of child rape and 1,089 cases of sexual abuse of children, compared with 467 reported cases of rape and 1,400 reported cases of child sexual abuse in 2004.

The law prohibits parents or other caretakers from abusing children mentally or physically in any way. Parents, teachers, and other adults are subject to prosecution if they physically punish a child, including slapping or spanking. Children have the right to report such abuses to the police. The usual sentence for such an offense is a fine combined with counseling and monitoring by social workers. Authorities may remove children from their homes and place them in foster care.

Trafficking in children was a problem (see section 5, Trafficking).

The government allocated funds to private organizations concerned with children's rights. The NGO Children's Rights in Society offered counseling to troubled youngsters. The government continued to be active internationally in efforts to prevent child abuse.

Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits trafficking in persons; however, there were reports that persons were trafficked to, through, and within the country.

The law prohibits the trafficking of persons for sexual purposes, provides for sentences of two to ten years' imprisonment for persons convicted of trafficking, and criminalizes attempting to traffic, conspiracy to traffic, and the failure to report such crimes. Police reported 41 reported cases of trafficking, as of the end of November.

To prosecute traffickers, authorities continued to use laws against procurement and an offense called "placing in distress," which can apply in cases where traffickers lure women from other countries under false pretenses. The laws on procurement and trafficking complement each other; however, the antitrafficking law requires that prosecutors prove traffickers used "improper means." Judges commonly ruled that "improper means" were absent in cases involving victims who consented to being trafficked. Although consent is irrelevant under the antitrafficking law, in practice judicial interpretation of the improper means criteria makes it difficult to obtain convictions. Prosecutors consequently continued to rely on the procurement laws for most convictions of traffickers. As of November, there were 80 cases of procurement reported, many involving trafficking victims. In July the country increased penalties for procurement; those convicted of procurement now face up to eight years in prison.

The country continued to be a transit point, and to a lesser extent a destination, for trafficked women and children. Many law enforcement officials and analysts estimated the number of trafficked women at approximately 500 per year. Victims came primarily from the Baltic region, Eastern Europe, or Russia. Those transiting the country came primarily from the Baltic region, heading towards suspected destination countries of Denmark, Germany, Norway, Spain, and the United Kingdom. There were occasional cases of trafficked women from South America and Thailand. Police reported approximately 10 percent of child trafficking involved victims ages 16 and 17. Most of these children were trafficked from the Baltic states and countries of the former Soviet Union. None of the cases involved young boys. Since November 2004 approximately 120 Chinese children arrived without papers in Stockholm and requested asylum. Police suspected the children were being trafficked to European countries for cheap labor or sexual exploitation. All 120 disappeared shortly after arrival. In May Dutch police detained six of these children in the Netherlands.

Traffickers typically recruited victims in their countries of origin to work as cleaners, babysitters, or in similar employment abroad. Once in the country, traffickers isolated and intimidated victims, and forced them to work as prostitutes in hotels, restaurants, massage parlors, or private apartments; some were likely locked up and had their passports confiscated.

The government allocated funds to domestic and international NGOs to provide shelter to victims and aid in rehabilitation. Police and social services also provided funding. The law enables trafficking victims who cooperate with police investigations to receive temporary residence permits. Holders of temporary residence permits have access to the full range of social benefits. Victims who do not cooperate with police investigations are not eligible to receive temporary residence permits and are deported immediately.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits employers from discriminating against persons with disabilities in hiring decisions and prohibits universities from discriminating against students with disabilities in making admissions decisions. No other specific law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities. There were 510 reports of governmental discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment, education, access to health care, or in the provision of other state services.

Regulations for new buildings require full accessibility, but there is no such requirement for existing public buildings, except for certain public entities that are obliged to make their facilities accessible. Many buildings and some means of public transportation remained inaccessible.

There is an ombudsman for disability issues, who accepts disability-related complaints.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Approximately 12 percent of the population was foreign born, with the largest groups from Finland, Iraq, Iran, and the former Yugoslavia. During 2004 there were 2,263 reports of xenophobic crimes of which 11.7 percent were related to neo-Nazism/White Power ideology. According to Swedish security police revised statistics, this reflected a 27 percent increase over 2003, but a change in the reporting methodology rendered it difficult to make a straightforward comparison. The government investigated and prosecuted race-related crimes; however, a study conducted by the national police academy indicated that officers in 17 of 20 police districts had insufficient knowledge about how to deal with hate crimes.

Estimates placed the number of active neo-Nazis, or white supremacists, at approximately three thousand. The NGO EXPO estimated that 1,200 to 1,300 individuals attended the annual neo-Nazi/White Supremacist march that takes place in Salem in December. Neo-Nazi groups operated legally, but courts have held that it is illegal to wear xenophobic symbols or racist paraphernalia or to display signs and banners with provocative symbols at rallies, since the law prohibits incitement of hatred against ethnic groups.

A report released in June by the COE concerning racism and intolerance in the country identified discrimination towards non-ethnic Swedes. The report noted inequalities in access to the labor market and housing. It identified segregation as a de facto occurrence. It also identified

an active presence of racist organizations that disseminate their views.

At year's end the ombudsman for ethnic discrimination had received reports of 876 cases, up from 794 in 2004.

In June a government-commissioned inquiry on power, integration, and structural discrimination presented highly critical findings of the country's integration policy. The inquiry identified shortcomings in the labor market, the legal system, and the educational system. The report's conclusions called for a shift of government emphasis away from integrating immigrants towards combating discrimination.

The law recognizes Sami (formerly known as Lapps), Swedish Finns, Tornedal-Finns, Roma, and Jews as national minorities. The government supported and protected minority languages. In response to a 2003 COE report that criticized government efforts to protect minority languages, parliament in 2004 initiated (at the government's request) an investigation of ways to improve the status of the Finnish language in the greater Stockholm and Malar regions. This investigation remained open during the year, and expanded its scope to include the Sami language. Also in response to the COE report, the government tasked a parliamentary committee on media support to examine ways to improve support for Sami and Meankili minority-language newspapers.

A report presented by the school authority on minority languages indicated that there were shortcomings in the provision of teachers and educational material for minority language teaching. The report also stated that the situation did not appear to have changed since a similar report in 2001 and that there appeared to be a municipal lack of concern for the issue.

In June the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights released a report, *The Situation of Roma in Selected Western European Countries*, which stated that Roma in the country who numbered approximately 20 to 25 thousand, suffered from discrimination and institutional racism. It found that Roma lived segregated, that they had limited access to public and private housing markets, and that authorities did not adapt public education to special needs of Romani children. The Living History Forum, a government authority, carried out a number of lectures and seminars on the situation of the Roma and highlighted their suffering in the Holocaust.

Indigenous People

Sami numbered between 17 and 20 thousand. In March 2004 the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination criticized the government for its failure to address problems related to Sami rights to land. In May 2004 an EU human rights report reiterated the main points of the UN committee's findings and criticized the government for not having resolved problems surrounding the Sami rights to both land and water. From 2002 to 2004, the government conducted a national campaign to increase public knowledge about Sami culture. In August the government opened a permanent, national Sami Information Center. Longstanding tensions between private landowners and Sami reindeer herders persisted. Courts in 2004 and during the year ruled that Sami must compensate private landowners for use of their land for winter pastures.

The Sami parliament acted as an advisory body to the government.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Societal violence and discrimination against homosexuals was a problem. In 2004 police received reports of 614 crimes with homophobic motive, a 117 percent increase from 2003. The NGO EXPO stated that the trend of increasing violence against homosexuals is continuing, but police authorities noted that the significant statistical increase for 2004 reflected in large part a change in reporting methodologies. The ombudsman against discrimination because of sexual orientation reported 87 cases during the year, up from 48 cases in 2004, but below the 137 cases reported in 2003.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law entitles workers to form and join unions of their choice, without previous authorization or excessive requirements, and workers exercised this right in practice. Approximately 80 percent of the workforce was unionized.

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 provides for collective bargaining, and workers exercised this right in practice. Approximately 80 percent of the workforce was under collective bargaining agreements. The law provides for the right to strike, as well as for employers to organize and to conduct lockouts; workers and employers exercised these rights in practice. Public-sector employees also enjoy the right to strike, subject to limitations protecting the public's immediate health and security. 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 such practices occurred (see section 5).

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age For Employment

The law and policies protect children from exploitation in the workplace, including policies regarding acceptable working conditions, and the government effectively implemented these laws and policies in practice. The law permits full-time employment at age 16 under the supervision of local authorities. Employees under age 18 may work only during the daytime and under supervision. Children as young as 13 years may work part-time or in "light" work with parental permission. Union representatives, police, and public prosecutors effectively enforced these restrictions.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There is no national minimum wage law. Wages were set by collective bargaining contracts every year. Nonunion establishments generally observe these contracts. Substantial benefits (e.g., housing, childcare) provided by social welfare entitlement programs assured even the lowest-paid workers and their families a decent standard of living. Foreign companies employing workers from their country of origin at wage levels below minimums stipulated in domestic collective-bargaining contracts created frictions in the labor market. For example, in one case, Swedish workers blocked a work site in the city of Vaxholm because construction workers from Latvia, who had been contracted to build a school, did not have collective agreements with a Swedish union.

The legal standard workweek is 40 hours or less. Both the law and collective bargaining agreements regulate overtime and rest periods. The maximum allowable overtime per year is two hundred hours. The law requires a minimum period of 36 consecutive hours of rest, preferably on weekends, during a period of 7 days. The law also provides employees with a minimum of five weeks' paid annual leave. The government effectively enforced these standards.

The work environment authority, a government-appointed board, issued occupational health and safety regulations; trained union stewards, safety ombudsmen, and government inspectors monitored them. Safety ombudsmen have the authority to stop unsafe activity immediately and to call in an inspector. These rules were effectively enforced. Work places were generally safe and healthy. In law and practice, workers could remove themselves from situations that endangered their health or safety without jeopardizing their future employment.

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