

ARMENIA 2012 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Armenia's constitution provides for a republic with an elected head of state and a unicameral legislature, the National Assembly. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) observers described the campaign leading to May 6 legislative elections as competitive but concluded violations of campaign provisions created an unequal playing field for participants and ran counter to the OSCE commitments. The ruling coalition, led by President Sargsian's Republican Party of Armenia, continued to dominate the political system. Security forces reported to civilian authorities.

The most significant human rights problems during the year were limitations on the right of citizens to change their government, corruption and lack of transparency in government, and the limited independence of the judiciary. Flaws in the conduct of May 6 legislative elections included the misuse of government resources to support the ruling party, credible allegations of vote buying, deficiencies in the complaints and appeals process, and continued shortcomings in the electoral code despite improvements. Allegations of persistent corruption at all levels of government undermined the rule of law, although the government took limited steps to punish low- to mid-level official corruption. Courts remained subject to political pressure from the executive branch, which resulted in some politically motivated prosecutions and sentencing.

Other abuses reported during the year included suspicious deaths in the military under noncombat conditions, continued hazing and other mistreatment of conscripts by officers and fellow soldiers, and a lack of accountability for such actions. Police allegedly continued to employ torture to obtain confessions and reportedly beat citizens during arrest and interrogation. Many prisons were overcrowded, unsanitary, and lacking in medical services for inmates. Authorities continued to arrest and detain criminal suspects without reasonable suspicion and to detain individuals arbitrarily. Trials were often prolonged, and courts failed to enforce laws providing for fair trials. Laws against government intrusion on the right to privacy and unlawful searches were inadequately enforced. The pre-election period was marked by diverse media coverage; however, the media continued to lack diversity of political opinion and objective reporting outside the campaign period. Members of religious minorities suffered from societal discrimination. Domestic violence remained a problem but largely went unreported to authorities. Human trafficking was a problem, which authorities

made efforts to combat. Persons with disabilities experienced discrimination in almost all areas of life. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons were subjected to societal abuse and discrimination by military and prison authorities. Workers' rights were limited and labor laws weakly enforced.

Although the government took some steps to punish officials in the security forces and elsewhere who committed abuses, some members of the security forces continued to commit human rights abuses with impunity while under the direction of civilian leadership. The government issued a report in December 2011 on its investigation into the deaths of eight civilians and two police officers following the 2008 presidential election but, as of year's end, had not held anyone accountable.

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, but noncombat deaths in the army continued to be a problem. The government reported that during the year 18 servicemen died under noncombat conditions, an increase from 2011.

For example, on March 2, media reported the death of soldier Tigran Varyan. Military authorities initiated an investigation into whether this was an induced suicide. An expert from the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Helsinki Association attended the forensic examination of the body and concluded that Varyan had been beaten and then shot. According to official information, Varyan's superior, Lieutenant Hovhannes Hakobyan, and some of Varyan's fellow service members periodically abused him over a three-month period. Military police arrested Hakobyan and charged him with abuse of power. Police also arrested Sergeant Erik Sargsyan and Sergeant Gevorg Manoukyan.

Human rights observers continued to assert authorities presented sanitized versions of reported incidents of hazing and death in the military and then focused their follow-up investigations on reinforcing the initial versions. Observers claimed the armed forces in most cases declined to punish those responsible.

On June 29, security guards and personnel of a restaurant owned by Republican Party member of parliament Ruben Hayrapetyan attacked and beat Vahe Avetyan, a military doctor, and four others. Avetyan died as a result of the injuries. Lawyers representing Avetyan's family alleged investigators deliberately

conducted a cursory and incomplete investigation and brought unusually lenient charges against the perpetrators. Hayrapetyan resigned from the National Assembly effective September 28. According to the victims, at least 10-15 people beat them after a dispute with a waiter on June 17. Six defendants faced trial, on charges of infliction of medium and grave injuries and battery. These charges jointly carry a maximum of 15 years' imprisonment. At year's end, the trial was ongoing.

Separatists, with Armenia's support, continued to control most of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven other Azerbaijani territories. The final status of Nagorno-Karabakh remained the subject of international mediation by the OSCE Minsk Group, cochaired by Russia, France, and the United States.

The government issued a report in December 2011 concerning the investigations into the deaths of eight civilians and two police officers in the aftermath of the 2008 presidential election. As of year's end, no one had been held accountable.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

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

While the law prohibits such practices, reports indicated that members of the security forces continued to employ them regularly. Witnesses reported that police beat citizens during arrest and interrogation. Human rights NGOs made similar allegations but noted most cases of police mistreatment were unreported due to fear of retaliation. Most abuses reportedly took place in police stations, which were not subject to public monitoring, rather than prisons and police detention facilities, which were. According to NGOs, many individuals transferred to prisons from police facilities alleged that police tortured, abused, and intimidated them while they were in police custody, mainly to extort confessions.

The annual report of the human rights defender (the ombudsman's office) for 2011, released in July, also stated that police investigative bodies continued to subject individuals to cruel, inhuman, and humiliating treatment, including psychological pressure, electrical shock, and severe beatings in order to obtain confessions.

In July the Public Monitoring Group of Police Detention Facilities (PMG), a coalition of NGOs that inspects police detention facilities with permission of the authorities, released its annual report covering 2011. The report noted that 266 of the 802 persons transferred from police stations to police detention facilities in the capital of Yerevan showed bruises and other bodily injuries. Authorities did not identify the causes of the injuries and reportedly did not hold anyone responsible for them.

In July the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern about the absence of a genuinely independent complaints' mechanism to investigate alleged torture or other mistreatment in detention facilities, as well as about the low number of prosecutions of such cases. In one such case, on July 27, the NGO Helsinki Committee reported that police beat Arman Davtyan with rubber batons and pieces of flooring and subjected him to involuntary electroshock treatment while holding him in a police station in the Mashtots District of Yerevan in order to extract self-incriminating testimony. Davtyan's injuries included broken fingers. The Special Investigative Service declined to investigate the alleged abuse. At the end of the year, Davtyan remained in custody awaiting trial for theft.

Within the armed forces, substandard living conditions, corruption, and lack of accountability of commanders continued to contribute to mistreatment and noncombat injuries. Although no reliable statistics on the prevalence of military hazing were available, soldiers reported to human rights organizations that abuses continued. Soldiers' families claimed that corrupt officials controlled military units, and human rights monitors and the ombudsman reported the government continued to conscript soldiers with serious health conditions that should have disqualified them from service.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Overcrowding, inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care, and corruption remained problems in prisons, and conditions in some cases were harsh and life threatening.

Physical Conditions: As of December 31, the prison population was 4,756. The capacity of all penitentiary institutions was 4,395 persons.

The average numbers of women and juveniles held in the Abovian penitentiary for women and juveniles during the year were 196 and 30, respectively. One of the 30 juveniles was female. There were no separate facilities for female juvenile

convicts, mainly because juvenile girls were rarely convicted; when they were convicted, authorities held them together with adult women. Inmates at the Abovian penitentiary were housed in large dormitories, with women housed separately from juvenile boys. According to domestic observers, the group arrangement for women generated conditions that were worse than those observed at penitentiaries where inmates had separate cells.

According to the PMG's 2011 report, overcrowding in police detention cells and the use of these cells as holding centers for pretrial detainees remained a problem. Outside of Yerevan pretrial detainees outnumbered arrestees in such cells by more than three to one--2,906 of the former compared with 874 of the latter. Unlike previous years, in 2011 the PMG did not report any cases of pretrial detainees held longer than the legal limit of three days in police detention facilities. While the report covered police detention facilities, the PMG was not permitted to monitor police stations.

According to official data, the number of deaths in prisons during the year was 28, compared with 32 in 2011, with the cause of death in most cases listed as illness, with some suicides. According to human rights organizations, overcrowding, the poor condition of the buildings, and negligence in providing health care to inmates contributed to the death rate. Prisons were connected to local potable water supply networks but experienced occasional disruptions in service.

In October the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) released a report describing its December 2011 follow-up visit to Kentron and Nubarashen prisons. The CPT, which had visited the institutions in 2010, found that conditions remained substandard in many respects, including access to recreation, sanitation, and the size of some cells. The CPT also found the bulk of its recommendations resulting from its 2010 visit with respect to life-sentenced prisoners remained unimplemented and that the confinement conditions of life-sentenced prisoners in Kentron Prison could be considered as amounting to inhuman treatment.

Administration: There were no reports authorities employed measures such as using alternative sentencing for nonviolent offenders. There was a policy of early release and release on parole. Human rights activists and attorneys continued to voice concern over the performance of the commissions on early release and release on parole. The Chamber of Advocates, the country's bar association, protested the absence of strict criteria to guide the commissions' decision-making and withdrew its representatives from the commissions in January. The absence of

an appeal mechanism and the overrepresentation of law enforcement representatives on the commissions also remained obstacles to due process.

There were no reports of efforts to improve prison recordkeeping.

The Civil Society Monitoring Board for penitentiaries, consisting of NGO representatives, continued reporting to the Ministry of Justice on the deteriorating health of certain convicts whom they claimed remained in prison although they were qualified for early release on medical grounds. The interagency medical commission in charge of considering the early release of prisoners on health grounds was generally very slow to act and did not have established procedures for their activities.

Prisons did not have ombudsmen.

Human rights organizations and the ombudsman continued to raise concerns convicts and detainees did not always have reasonable access to visitors, since even their minimal visitation entitlement was not always met because of overcrowded conditions and lack of suitable space. Prisoners were permitted religious observance.

Authorities did not always permit prisoners and detainees to submit uncensored appeals to authorities concerning credible allegations of inhumane conditions, although the prevalence of such censorship was unknown. By law censorship of the communications of pretrial detainees requires a court order. According to human rights organizations, prison administrators censored the letters of detainees in numerous cases without judicial oversight. According to the Helsinki Association and the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor, authorities did not investigate credible allegations of inhumane conditions.

Monitoring: The government generally permitted domestic and international human rights groups, including the CPT, to monitor prison and detention center conditions. They were permitted to speak to prisoners privately. The government permitted the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit both prisons and pretrial detention centers in accordance with its standard modalities.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention. Although authorities generally complied with the legal requirement of judicial review, judges were often reluctant

to challenge prosecutors' requests to detain individuals or to review police conduct during arrests. Statutory law does not require a person who is apprehended under authority of an arrest warrant be promptly brought before a judge for review of his detention. On the other hand, case law from the Cassation Court (the highest court for cases not related to constitutional issues) requires prompt judicial review, and this procedure was generally followed.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The national police force is responsible for internal security, while the National Security Service is responsible for national security, intelligence activities, and border control. The president appoints the heads of both organizations, and they report directly to him.

The police and the National Security Service continued to lack sufficient training, resources, and established procedures to prevent incidents of abuse. Impunity was a problem; there was no dedicated independent mechanism for investigating police abuse. In July the UN Human Rights Committee noted its concern about the lack of accountability of law enforcement officers in cases of excessive use of force and the lack of an independent mechanism for investigating police abuse.

Citizens may sue police in court, but this avenue is limited. Before the trial citizens have the legal right to file complaints alleging abuses inflicted upon them by law enforcement personnel in the course their criminal investigations, but defendants must obtain permission from police or the prosecutor's office to undergo the forensic medical examination necessary to substantiate an accusation of physical abuse. Human rights organizations continued to report that authorities rarely granted such permission or delayed it until physical signs of abuse were no longer visible.

NGOs reported that judges routinely ignored defendants' claims that their testimony was coerced through physical abuse. An exception was a ruling on April 28 by a trial court excluding evidence that, according to defendant Felix Grigoryan, was obtained through torture. Grigoryan claimed police beat him, burnt his leg with a hot iron, and hit his feet with clubs to obtain a confession. He also claimed police threatened to torture his father and brother. The trial court ruled a police investigation into the torture allegations was ineffective, excluded the evidence obtained, and found the defendant not guilty. However, the appellate court reversed the trial court's decision of inadmissibility and ordered a new trial.

Police corruption continued to be a problem (see section 4).

Arrest Procedures and Treatment While in Detention

Authorities on occasion detained and arrested criminal suspects without arrest warrants and without reasonable suspicion. By law an investigative body must either formally arrest or release an individual within three hours of taking him or her into custody. Within 72 hours the investigative body must release the arrested person or bring charges and obtain a detention warrant from a judge. Judges rarely denied police requests for detention warrants. Police routinely summoned individuals and held them longer than three hours without formally arresting them under the pretext that they were material witnesses rather than suspects. Domestic observers contended police avoided labeling summoned persons as suspects to avoid the legal requirement to grant them the rights of suspects.

The law requires police to inform detainees of their right to remain silent, to make a telephone call, and to representation by an attorney from the moment of arrest. Detainees must be provided with public defenders if they are indigent. In practice police often questioned and pressured detainees to confess to crimes prior to indictment and in the absence of legal counsel. The practice of detaining individuals as “material witnesses“ before designating them as suspects allowed authorities to subject them to questioning without the benefit of a defense attorney.

In July the UN Human Rights Committee criticized the frequent use of pretrial detention and stated that detainees were not fully informed of their rights and were frequently deprived of timely access to a lawyer and a medical doctor. The committee noted detainees were not promptly brought before a judge.

According to the PMG’s 2011 report, the group’s monitors encountered numerous instances of persons being formally arrested only after being held from one to three days in police stations. The report indicated the registries of police detention facilities cited only 380 occasions when the right to meet with an attorney had been exercised by the 4,582 persons held in such facilities during 2011, including multiple instances when the same person met with his attorney on several occasions. The law provides for a bail system, but in practice courts generally denied requests for bail and ordered that defendants remain in pretrial detention.

In some cases defendants were released on their own recognizance pending trial, with the requirement that they surrender their passports and sign statements promising not to leave the country or, in some cases, city limits.

Arbitrary Arrest: The UN Human Rights Council's (UNHRC) Working Group on Arbitrary Detention noted in a report issued in 2011 that police, National Security Service personnel, and border guards often detained or arrested individuals without an arrest warrant. Arrests were often not a consequence of a police investigation; rather, people were held to initiate an investigation, often made in the hope that the suspect would confess, thus making further investigation unnecessary.

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial or preventive detention remained a chronic problem. According to official information, during the year approximately 8 percent of the prison population consisted of pretrial detainees, and an additional 9.5 percent were detainees whose trials were in progress.

Although the law requires that decisions about detention be reasonable and that detention be used as a measure of last resort, attorneys and court observers complained that detention was often approved routinely by courts with little consideration given to whether less restrictive alternatives might suffice to assure the orderly administration of justice. The overuse of detention applied also to juvenile offenders. There is no separate system of justice for juvenile offenders.

Although the law requires a well-reasoned justification for extending pretrial custody every two months, judges routinely granted extensions on unclear grounds. On the other hand, authorities generally respected the provision limiting total pretrial detention to 12 months. The law does not establish time limits on the detention of defendants once their cases are sent to court. According to the UNHRC's 2011 report, prosecutors regularly requested and received trial postponements from judges on the grounds that the prosecutors required more time to prepare for trial, i.e. to prolong investigations. Prosecutors, in turn, tended to put the blame for the postponement of trials on defense lawyers and their requests for more time to prepare their defense.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provides for an independent judiciary. In practice courts remained subject to political pressure from the executive branch as well as the expectation that judges would find the accused guilty in almost every case. The UNHRC reported in 2011 the government's fight against corruption also had negative implications for the independence of judges, who appeared to be ordering harsh penalties from fear that any sign of leniency would arouse suspicion they had been bribed.

One of the main impediments to a fair trial was the absence of an independent judiciary. Judges themselves lacked efficient legal remedies if the executive or legislative branch decided to punish them.

The vulnerability of judges to dismissal for their decisions, combined with the absence of any effective remedy for such treatment, had a strong chilling effect on the judiciary. The Council of Justice, headed by the chair of the Cassation Court, appoints and dismisses judges and may charge a judge with a miscarriage of justice, even for a ruling that was never appealed to a higher court or in which the appellate courts found no errors. The decisions of the council are not subject to review. There were reports the Cassation Court was directly involved in dictating the outcome of almost every case to lower court judges.

On December 18, the Constitutional Court rejected the appeal by dismissed judge Samvel Mnatsakanyan challenging the constitutionality of procedures that exempt the decisions of the Council of Justice from judicial review.

There was no progress during the year in the efforts of former judge Surik Ghazaryan to have his pension reinstated. In 2011, according to credible sources, Chief Justice Arman Mkrtumyan, the head of the Cassation Court, forced Ghazaryan to resign, and lose his pension, in retaliation for not consulting with the Cassation Court prior to his 2010 ruling in a high-profile case involving the interests of Yukos Oil Company and Rosneft (Russia's state-owned oil company). The ruling was in favor of Yukos Oil Company.

On March 21, police resumed criminal proceedings against Armen Mikayelyan, a former director of Yukos CIS Ltd (the Armenian subsidiary of Yukos Oil Company), on charges of abuse of authority by employees of commercial or other organizations. According to credible sources, the government charged Mikayelyan at the direct request of the Russian firm Rosneft in order to exert pressure on Mikayelyan to cooperate with Rosneft's efforts to take over the assets of Yukos CIS Ltd.

Authorities generally complied with court orders.

Trials usually met many of the procedural standards for fairness. They were often unfair in substance, however, because many judges felt compelled to work with prosecutors to achieve convictions. Judges were reluctant to challenge police experts or hold the prosecution accountable for meeting an appropriately high

standard of guilt, thereby hampering the defendant's ability to mount a credible defense.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the presumption of innocence, but this right was not respected. The law requires that most trials be public but permits exceptions, including in the interest of "morals," national security, and for the "protection of the private lives of the participants." Juries are not used; a single judge issues verdicts in trial courts (except for crimes punishable by life imprisonment), and panels of judges preside in the higher courts. Defendants have the right to counsel of their own choosing, and the government is required to provide them with a public defender upon request. Outside of Yerevan this obligation was frequently not honored due to a shortage of defense lawyers.

By law defendants may confront witnesses, present evidence, and examine the government's case in advance of a trial, but in practice defendants and their attorneys had very little ability to challenge government witnesses. This was particularly prejudicial to defendants in challenging the evidence gathered by police officers, who are prohibited by law from testifying in their official capacities unless they are a witness or a victim in a case. Thus, official police reports detailing the evidence found at a crime scene or the confession of a defendant were routinely received as evidence without any in-court testimony from police. Defense lawyers had almost no ability to challenge the findings of these official reports, which courts generally considered to be unimpeachable. Judges controlled the "witness list," which designated the witnesses deemed to have evidence relevant to a criminal case, and defense attorneys complained that at times they were not allowed to call or obtain the attendance at trial of witnesses whom they believed to have evidence helpful to their client's defense. Defendants, prosecutors, and the injured party have the right of appeal and often exercised it.

The vast majority of criminal cases sent to trial resulted in conviction. Although many weak cases resulted in convictions, the practice by police investigators of declining to forward weak cases to the courts may also have played a role in the high conviction rate. The acquittal rate during the year was 1.5 percent.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

Local human rights observers claimed that the unusual severity of the sentences given to four opposition Armenian National Congress youth activists involved in

an August 2011 altercation with police was politically motivated. On July 20, Artak Karapetyan, Davit Kiramijyan, and Sargis Gevorgyan were charged with hooliganism and sentenced to from two to three years' imprisonment. Tigran Arakaelyan, convicted of breaking the nose of a police officer in the incident, received a six-year sentence.

On January 16, an appeals court confirmed the conviction of Jehovah's Witness member Andranik Makvetsyan for preventing an Armenian Apostolic Church priest from exercising his "right to preach" near a church and violating the priest's "right to prevent" Makvetsyan from proselytizing. Observers reported the law does not include such rights. Makvetsyan served his six-month sentence and was released.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Although citizens had access to courts to bring lawsuits seeking damages for, or cessation of, human rights violations, the courts were widely perceived as corrupt. Citizens also had access to the Office of the Human Rights Defender, as well as the possibility of challenging the constitutionality of legislation in the Constitutional Court. The Constitutional Court exercised its power to determine the constitutionality of statutes in dozens of cases during the year, but its decisions were unevenly enforced because lower courts are subordinate to the Cassation Court rather than the Constitutional Court.

Regional Human Rights Court Decisions: Citizens who exhausted domestic legal remedies could appeal to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) with regard to alleged violations by the state of the European Convention on Human Rights. Dozens of appeals were pending before the court at year's end. During the year the ECHR issued judgments in 16 new cases involving the country and found violations of the convention by the state in all these cases.

The government generally complied with the ECHR decisions in terms of monetary compensation. However, the government did not reopen cases on which the ECHR rulings were made, and courts often did not follow applicable the ECHR precedent.

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

The constitution prohibits unauthorized searches and provides for the right to privacy and confidentiality of communications. However, there were unconfirmed

reports law enforcement bodies tapped the telephone communications and e-mail correspondence of certain individuals, including human rights activists and members of the political opposition, whom the government wanted to keep under scrutiny.

Law enforcement bodies may not wiretap a telephone, intercept correspondence, or conduct searches without obtaining the permission of a judge. Law enforcement bodies generally adhered to the legal procedures, but the ombudsman's 2011 report indicated there were instances when the police conducted searches at homes without court warrants under the pretext of looking for wanted persons. According to attorneys, judges often authorized wiretaps, the interception of correspondence, and searches without receiving the compelling evidence of criminal activity the law requires, rendering the procedure largely a formality.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The government did not always uphold these rights. There were several incidents of violence toward journalists, largely in connection with the May 6 National Assembly elections. The number of lawsuits for libel and defamation decreased.

Freedom of Speech: On April 12, organizers of an Azerbaijani film festival in the town of Gyumri canceled the event after dozens of protesters blocked the festival venue. Protesters also blocked a subsequent effort to hold the festival in Vanadzor, in the office of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor. On April 16, protesters in Vanadzor threw eggs and stones at the office, breaking some windows. Authorities declined to open a criminal case against those responsible for the vandalism. The showing of Azerbaijani films in the preceding three years was prevented due to security concerns and by various forms of pressure against the organizers.

Freedom of Press: Print media continued to lack diversity of political opinion and objective reporting. International and national observers reported that, in contrast to previous elections, broadcast media provided diverse and objective coverage of campaign of the May elections. The government did not release a promised audit of the country's television and radio frequencies that provided the technical basis for limiting the number of digital broadcasting licenses it permitted after the switchover from analogue to digital transmission planned for 2015.

Most newspapers, with the exception of the government-sponsored *Hayastani Hanrapetutyun* and its Russian-language version, *Respublika Armenii*, were privately owned. The print media published differing viewpoints, although most publications tended to reflect the political leanings of their proprietors and financial backers. The political factions and business interests that sponsored these publications showed little interest in developing fair and balanced nationwide coverage. Only a handful of newspapers operated as efficient and self-sustaining enterprises.

Online media outlets were the primary alternative source of information, and, unlike broadcast media provided diverse political opinions. Their content was largely unrestricted.

Newspaper circulation remained limited, as did the audience for the country's 20 radio stations, three of which were public and two broadcast from abroad. All but three of the 95 television stations in operation during the year were privately owned; most were small broadcasters based in outlying regions. Four stations broadcast from abroad. Most stations were owned by politicians in the ruling party or politically connected executives and presented one-sided views of events. Regional television channels provided some alternative viewpoints, often via externally produced content.

On September 4, A1Plus TV, forced off the air in 2002, reached an agreement with ArmNewsTV to air a daily 20-minute daily news program during prime time. A1Plus was fully in charge of its content without interference from ArmNews. A1Plus started broadcasting on September 10.

Violence and Harassment: Media outlets, particularly broadcasters, feared reprisals for reporting critical of the government. Such reprisals could include lawsuits, the threat of losing a broadcast license, selective tax investigation, or loss of revenue when advertisers learned an outlet was in disfavor with the government. Fear of retribution led to a high degree of media self-censorship.

There were some incidents of violence against reporters in connection with the May 6 National Assembly elections. On May 6, Radio Liberty reported that unknown persons attacked reporter Elina Chilingaryan outside a polling station in Yerevan while she was filming. Police opened a criminal case but closed it on July 13.

On May 25, the National Security Service opened an investigation of the former head of the Civilitas Foundation and former foreign minister Vardan Oskanian on suspicion of money laundering, a day after Oskanian's party, Prosperous Armenia, announced its decision not to join the ruling coalition. The Civilitas Foundation operated one of the largest independent online media outlets, CivilNet, which ran several stories criticizing the administration of the May 6 elections. CivilNet reported that National Security Service agents harassed and followed its reporters and entered its office without appropriate authorization. Many observers described the investigation and its timing after the elections as politically motivated.

Censorship and Content Restrictions: On March 21, the National Assembly passed a new law on the state of emergency, which allows the restriction of freedom of expression and media during a declared state of emergency.

Libel Laws/National Security: A November 2011 recommendation by the Constitutional Court that courts avoid levying disproportionately heavy fines in libel and defamation cases resulted in fewer libel and defamation suits during the year and the imposition of smaller damages against media outlets.

Internet Freedom

There were no government restrictions on access to the Internet or credible reports that the government monitored e-mail or Internet chat rooms without appropriate legal authority. Individuals and groups could generally engage in the expression of views via the Internet, including by e-mail. However, the iDitord Web site operated by a number of NGOs to register election violations suffered a cyber attack that disrupted its activities for several hours during the legislative voting on May 6.

According to the International Telecommunication Union, 32 percent of the population used the Internet in 2011.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no reports of government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events, although NGOs criticized the government for failing to protect individuals and entities who sought to present unpopular cultural material.

On October 17, the EU Delegation in Armenia announced the cancellation of screenings of the film "Parada," scheduled for October 17-18. The film dealt with

LGBT rights. Various venues reportedly canceled their agreements to host the screenings due to unidentified “pressure.” Civil society representatives appealed to the government to take necessary security measures and provide an appropriate hall to ensure the screening of the movie.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution and the law provide for freedom of assembly, and the government generally respected this right.

There were isolated reports of local authorities blocking political rallies or giving preferential treatment to progovernment events during the campaign prior to the May 6 elections. There were reports local authorities blocked civil servants from attending opposition rallies, and there were widespread reports that government officials compelled public servants and students to attend progovernment political rallies.

Freedom of Association

The constitution provides for freedom of association, and the government generally respected this right. The law gives citizens, except for military and law enforcement personnel, the right to form associations, including political parties and trade unions.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/j/drl/irf/rpt.

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

The law provides for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation. In practice there were some reports of limited restrictions connected with travel to political rallies. Authorities cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees and asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

In-country Movement: During the year there were reports authorities restricted freedom of movement by preventing citizens residing outside Yerevan from traveling to attend opposition rallies in the capital. There were isolated reports that local authorities restricted travel within districts to prevent attendance at political rallies.

Foreign Travel: To leave the country on a temporary or permanent basis, citizens must obtain exit visas. Exit visas for temporary travel out of the country could be routinely purchased within one day of application for approximately 1,000 drams (\$2.46) for each year of validity.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

During the country's war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, authorities evacuated approximately 65,000 households from the border region, but most IDPs later returned to their homes or settled elsewhere. During a visit to the country in 2010, the UN representative on the human rights of IDPs cited a lack of adequate housing and limited economic opportunities as remaining obstacles faced by some of the country's IDPs and former refugees.

Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The laws provide for granting asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. The State Migration Service operates a facility for asylum seekers and is responsible for registering them and adjudicating their asylum applications.

Reports late in the year indicated as many as 7,000 persons from Syria, mostly of Armenian ethnicity, arrived in the country because of the internal conflict in Syria. By year's end, the State Migration Service received 519 applications for refugee status. It had approved 191 applications, rejected 94, and had not indicated a decision on 234. The vast majority of the remaining ethnic Armenians from Syria received Armenian citizenship or long-term residency permits.

Refugee Abuse: In July the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern that some asylum seekers were prosecuted for illegal entry, despite identifying themselves as persons seeking asylum. Asylum seekers serving sentences for illegal entry into the country were generally not released following the registration

of their asylum applications and were required to serve the remainder of their sentences.

Access to Basic Services: Authorities often had difficulty integrating asylum seekers into society once they obtained permanent residency status. Housing allocated to refugees from the 1991-94 conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh was often inadequate in supply and in poor condition. Refugees faced the same social and economic hardships that confronted the general population.

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

Although the constitution and law provide citizens with the right to change their government peacefully, observers criticized government interference with that right during the most recent national elections.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: National Assembly elections occurred on May 6. The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), in its election observation final report released on June 26, stated the elections were held under "an improved legal framework" and were "characterized by a competitive, vibrant, and largely peaceful campaign." ODIHR also stated the elections were marked by a "low level of confidence in the integrity of the process."

Unlike previous years, the ODIHR noted that the Central Election Commission "worked in an open and transparent manner" and "administered the elections in an overall professional and efficient manner." However, according to the ODIHR and other observers, the government failed to meet fully international standards, including an equal playing field for all participants. Observers cited numerous violations, including abuse of administrative resources, widespread allegations of vote buying, deficiencies in the complaints and appeals process, and unequal implementation of the electoral code. Although the electoral code adopted in May 2011 contained a number of improvements, the ODIHR noted a number of substantive shortcomings, including restrictions on candidacy rights, ease of candidate deregistration, and an overly restrictive complaints and appeals process. There were also widespread concerns about the quality and integrity of voting lists.

The Constitutional Court denied a motion filed jointly by several opposition parties to nullify the election results.

In contrast to previous years, the Central Election Commission and the National Commission on Television and Radio attempted to ensure equal access to media for parties during the official campaign period. However, there were continued complaints that progovernment parties and individual candidates received preferential media coverage outside the campaign period.

Political Parties: There were no reports of undue legal restrictions on the registration or activity of political parties. Nevertheless, there were continued complaints that the government used its administrative resources to discourage financial contributions to opposition parties, thereby limiting their activities.

There were complaints that well-connected business owners funneled a portion of their profits to parties in the ruling coalition in return for unfair advantage in the form of light or no taxation. In addition, there were allegations that the government discriminated against members of opposition political parties in hiring decisions.

Participation of Women and Minorities: In July the UN Human Rights Committee noted its continued concern about the low level of participation by women in political life and the low level of their participation in decision-making posts in the public sector. At year's end there were 14 women in the 131-seat National Assembly, two in the cabinet, and no female governors. Only five of the elected 52 Yerevan City Council members were women, and no women headed any of Yerevan's 12 administrative districts.

While the electoral code requires a gender balance of at least 20 percent women on party lists, the number of women in the National Assembly remained below the mandated quota. Several female candidates on party lists declined their seats, withdrawing their candidacies after the elections were over. Women won two of 41 seats contested in majoritarian elections.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials; however, the government did not implement the law effectively, and many officials engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. Civic groups working to address corruption stated that authorities continued to ignore media reports implicating government officials in corrupt practices.

In July the UN Human Rights Committee expressed its concern about allegations of persistent corruption among all branches of the government. The committee stated that the lack of convincing results in the fight against high-level corruption undermined public trust in the administration of justice.

On September 6, a foreign court fined Vardan Ayvazyan, a member of the National Assembly and chair of its Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, \$37.5 million for demanding a bribe from the Global Gold Mining Company when he was minister of the environment. At year's end Ayvazyan remained in his National Assembly posts, and no investigation was launched into the reported corruption.

On September 28, police arrested Vazgen Khachikyan, former chief of the State Social Security Service, who was dismissed in 2011 on suspicion of embezzling approximately 113 million drams (\$278,000) in the form of pensions for persons who were deceased.

The government implemented some reforms within the framework of the "regulatory guillotine" program adopted in 2011, which were also included in the government's Open Government Partnership action plan. The guillotine program abolished a number of procedures in order to enhance regulation of business and administration of tax and customs administration as well as to reduce and reduce the opportunities for corruption.

Corruption had a significant impact upon economic growth. The World Economic Forum's *Global Competitiveness Report for 2012-13* listed corruption as the most problematic factor for doing business in the country.

Corruption among police remained a problem, but action was taken against several police officials. On March 24, a trial court sentenced Major General Hovhannes Tamamian, former head of the Directorate General of Criminal Investigations of the national police, to four years in prison for abusing his authority by deliberately mishandling investigations of killings in 2010 in Yerevan and in 2009 in Gavar, presumably to help persons connected to him. Tamamian did not appeal.

On May 30, a trial court sentenced Colonel Margar Ohanian, former head of the traffic police, to six years' imprisonment for abuse of power, grand larceny, and embezzling 218 million drams (\$537,000) worth of gasoline intended for traffic police vehicles. Ohanian did not appeal.

The law requires high-ranking public officials and their families to file annual asset declarations. Pursuant to the law, the Ethics Commission for High-Ranking Officials collects and monitors the declarations but has no authority to verify their accuracy or sanction officials for false declarations. In September the commission began to publish asset declarations on its official Web site. There are no criminal penalties for noncompliance or filing of false declarations.

Police were responsible for investigating corruption, and the prosecutor general was responsible for prosecuting it. Neither agency actively collaborated with civil society. According to widespread reports, neither agency operated effectively or independently, nor was either sufficiently resourced.

Although the constitution and laws prohibit individuals engaged in entrepreneurial activity from holding public office, executives continued to occupy seats in the National Assembly, and various government officials reportedly continued to use their offices to promote their private business interests.

The law provides for public access to government information. In practice many government bodies and officials were reluctant to grant such access. As of year's end, the government had not adopted the regulations on the collection and provision of information that were required by, and supplementary to, the 2003 Freedom of Information Law. Officials cited the absence of these regulations when refusing to provide information. NGOs were more successful in gaining access to information through the courts than obtaining it directly from government agencies.

Section 5. 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, freely investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. At times government officials were cooperative and responsive to their views.

Authorities generally did not deny requests for meetings by domestic NGO monitors and followed some NGO recommendations, particularly those related to social welfare, education, and local matters. At the same time, they were usually unresponsive to NGO allegations of mistreatment and abuse by law enforcement bodies. Authorities' usual response in such instances was that they had investigated the allegations but could not corroborate them.

Authorities occasionally harassed human rights groups. Arman Veziryan, a member of the Helsinki Association for Human Rights, was monitoring pre-election activity of the opposition Armenian National Congress in Shengavit when a resident, Tigran Manukyan, attacked him. On June 12, police initiated a criminal case against Veziryan on charges of battery. The Helsinki Association asserted that Veziryan was persecuted for protesting procedural violations. At the end of the year, both Veziryan and Manukyan were on trial for their roles in the incident.

According to human rights observers, authorities in Vanadzor declined to prosecute protesters who threw stones and eggs at the office of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor (see section 2.a.).

Government Human Rights Bodies: The Office of the Human Rights Defender (the ombudsman) has a mandate to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms from abuse by the national, regional, and local governments. The effectiveness of the ombudsman was at times limited due to resource constraints. Throughout the year the ombudsman published ad hoc and regular reports on human rights issues.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution and law prohibit discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, or social status. The government did not effectively enforce these prohibitions.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape is a criminal offense and carries a maximum sentence of 15 years; spousal rape is prosecuted under the general rape statutes. According to official statistics, authorities registered 19 cases of rape and attempted rape during the year, none of which constituted spousal rape. Crimes such as rape continued to be underreported due to social stigma, as well as the absence of female police officers and investigators.

While the law provides penalties for domestic violence that are the same as for other forms of violence, domestic violence was not effectively prosecuted. Spousal abuse and violence against women were believed to be widespread. Law-enforcement bodies reported 762 cases of domestic violence during the year, of which 455 involved abuse by a husband, wife, or a partner. The domestic violence cases included, among others, instances of murder, attempted murder, battery, and

torture. From January to July, the Women's Resource Center registered 897 calls to its hotline complaining of domestic violence. The center's shelter served 19 women with 23 children.

According to local observers, most domestic violence continued to go unreported because victims were afraid of physical harm, apprehensive that police would return them to their husbands, or ashamed to disclose their family problems. There were also reports that police were reluctant to act in such cases and discouraged women from filing complaints, especially outside of Yerevan. The majority of domestic violence cases were of low or medium gravity. In such cases a victim can decline to press charges, and victims who reported domestic violence were often pressured by perpetrators to withdraw charges or recant previous testimony.

In a case cited by human rights observers as indicative of the reluctance of authorities to hold male spouses fully responsible for the violence they perpetrate, the media on July 14 reported the death of 21-year-old Maro Guloyan. According to the reports, Guloyan's husband frequently beat her and threatened her and her family. While authorities initiated a criminal case based on charges of inducing suicide, Guloyan's family believed the husband had killed Guloyan, who was pregnant, on the day she had decided to leave him. The investigation continued at year's end; the results of an exhumation demanded by the family were not known.

In July the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern about the persistence of high levels of violence against women, particularly domestic violence.

The Armenian Apostolic Church began to include domestic violence campaigning in parish priests' training.

Sexual Harassment: The law does not specifically prohibit sexual harassment, although it addresses lewd acts and indecent behavior. While there was no public data on the extent of the problem, observers believed sexual harassment of women in the workplace was widespread.

Reproductive Rights: According to the law, couples and individuals have the right to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing, and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so free from discrimination, coercion, and violence. In practice, especially in more traditional families, the male spouse and his parents often made such decisions. There was little access to, or information about, contraception, especially in rural areas. Skilled attendance

during childbirth was more accessible in large towns and other population centers. There were reports that women, especially those in rural or remote areas, faced insufficient access to general and reproductive healthcare services.

Discrimination: Men and women enjoy equal legal status under family law, labor law, property law, inheritance law, and in the judicial system, but discrimination based on gender was a continuing problem in both public and private sectors. Women generally did not enjoy the same professional opportunities or wages as men and were often relegated to more menial or low-paying jobs. According to official data for 2010, there was a significant gap between the average monthly salary of men and women; in addition, the average monthly salary for younger women was higher than that for older women. Women remained underrepresented in leadership positions in all branches and at all levels of government.

Gender-biased Sex Selection: A survey conducted in cooperation between government bodies and the UN Population Fund revealed significant abnormalities in the country's sex ratio at birth. The government had yet to implement measures to address the gender imbalance.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship is derived from one's parents, and birth registration is a parental responsibility. Observers indicated that some parents, particularly the poorest and most socially disadvantaged, could not register their children at birth, in part because of the cost of transportation to registration centers. Lack of birth registration potentially deprived such children of access to essential social services and increased their vulnerability. During the year international donors continued to work with authorities to address the problem. In 2000-10, according to UNICEF the births of 96 percent of children were registered.

Child Abuse: In 2011 the domestic branch of the international NGO Save the Children published an assessment of child abuse in the regions of Kotayk, Aragatsotn, and Shirak. According to the report, family members at times subjected children to physical and psychological abuse and neglect, particularly by failing to provide adequate food, clothing, and shelter. Children reported abuse outside the home as well, including physical and psychological abuse in institutions, schools, and occasionally on the streets.

Child Marriage: The minimum age for marriage is 17 for girls and 18 for boys. According to UNICEF, between 2000 and 2010, an average of 10 percent of children (boys and girls) were married by the age of 18.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: Antitrafficking statutes prohibit the sexual exploitation of children and provide for sentences of seven to 15 years in prison for trafficking of children, depending on whether aggravating circumstances are present. Child pornography is punishable by imprisonment for up to seven years.

Statutory rape, defined by law as sexual acts with a person under 16, is punishable by a fine and up to two years in prison. According to domestic observers, the legal framework was inadequate for assessing and prosecuting sexual crimes involving children. Sexual solicitation of minors and the failure to report statutory rape are not crimes.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

Anti-Semitism

The size of the country's Jewish population was estimated at between 500 and 1,000 persons. There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with any disability, in employment, education, access to health care, and the provision of other state services; however, discrimination remained a problem. The law and a special government decree mandate accessibility to buildings, including schools, for persons with disabilities, but very few buildings or other facilities were accessible. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs is responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities but failed to do so effectively.

Persons with disabilities were seldom seen outside the home due to the social stigma associated with disabilities. At times children with disabilities missed

school, due both to discrimination and the absence of facilities to accommodate their needs. According to a survey conducted during the year by UNICEF, one in five children with disabilities did not attend school. According to UNICEF one in every eight children with disabilities surveyed resided in a residential care institution (orphanage or special boarding school). Only one in 20 of those children had access to mainstream education, while five in 20 went to special schools and 14 in 20 did not go to school at all.

Persons with all types of disabilities experienced problems in virtually all spheres of life, including health care, social and psychological rehabilitation, education, transportation, communication, access to employment, and social protection. Access to information and communications was a particularly significant problem for persons with sensory disabilities. Penitentiaries lacked adequate accommodations for persons with disabilities.

Hospitals, residential care, and other facilities for persons with serious disabilities remained substandard. According to official data, more than 90 percent of persons with disabilities who were able to work were unemployed.

The Helsinki Association's 2011 report also discussed conditions for patients in psychiatric clinics. The report described a number of significant shortcomings, in particular poor sanitary and hygienic conditions, inadequate access to communications and information, and inadequate medical care.

There were widespread reports of corruption and arbitrary rulings in the Medical-Social Expertise Commission, a governmental body under the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs that determines a person's disability status.

Societal Abuses, Discrimination, and Acts of Violence Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

No antidiscrimination laws apply to sexual orientation or gender identity. Societal attitudes toward LGBT persons remained highly negative, with society generally viewing homosexuality as an affliction. Societal discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity negatively affected the employment, family relations, and access to education and health care of sexual minorities.

On May 8, three men firebombed the DIY Bar in Yerevan, a popular spot for activists who promoted equal rights for women and minorities, including LGBT persons. Although there were no injuries, the bar was destroyed. Police were

summoned but arrived 12 hours after firefighters extinguished the fire. The bar owner identified three suspects, of whom police arrested two, the brothers Hampig and Mkrtich Khapazyan. Legislators from the opposition Armenian Revolutionary Federation, Artsvik Minasyan and Hrayr Karapetyan, posted bail for one suspect and police released the other after he promised not to leave the country. A number of other National Assembly members, including Eduard Sharmazanov and Hovhannes Sahakyan from the ruling Republican Party, praised the actions of the Khapazyan brothers as a justified defense of the Armenian nation. Vandals spray-painted swastikas and threats against the owner of the destroyed bar on May 17 and 21.

Also in May the efforts of several NGOs to hold a “diversity march,” which local nationalists dubbed a gay parade, were thwarted by youths who shouted antigay slogans and tried to block the entrance to a building where a diversity exhibition was scheduled. Police ensured that there was no violence between the marchers and the nationalists and that the marchers were able to enter the exhibition while the protesters remained outside. The NGOs alleged that those who attempted to block the march were the same persons as those involved in the DIY bar bombing.

Openly gay men were exempt from military service, purportedly because of concern fellow service members would abuse them. However, the exemption required a medical finding, based on a psychological examination, that an individual had a mental disorder; this information was stamped in the individual’s personal documents.

According to human rights activists, sexual minorities were frequent targets for humiliating discrimination in prisons, where they were forced to perform degrading labor and were separated from the rest of the prison population.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

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

Many employers reportedly discriminated against potential employees by age, most commonly requiring job applicants to be between the ages of 18 and 30. For example, during the year the city of Yerevan posted a job vacancy for tour operators specifying that they be below 30 years of age. While this discrimination appeared to be widespread, authorities did not take any action to mitigate it. After

age 40, unemployed workers, particularly women, had little chance of finding jobs appropriate to their education or skills.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law protects the right of workers, except for personnel of the armed forces and law enforcement agencies, to form and to join independent unions. The law also provides for the right to strike, with the same exceptions, and permits collective bargaining. These activities could be conducted without government interference. The law stipulates that a workers' right cannot be restricted because of his or her membership in a union. The labor code provides a list of reasons a person can be fired, which does not include union activity.

Labor rights were not always respected in practice. Labor organizations remained weak because of employer resistance, high unemployment, and poor economic conditions. Labor unions were generally inactive with the exception of those connected with the mining and chemical industries. There were small-scale protests by workers due to dissatisfaction with delayed salary payments. Unions were closely tied to the government. There were no reports of specific acts of antiunion discrimination, but there were reports in past years that some mining enterprises, including some financed by foreign investors, discouraged employees from joining labor unions with the implied threat of loss of employment.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced and compulsory labor, and the government effectively enforced such laws. During the year the government investigated six, and prosecuted three, cases of labor trafficking, the only reported instances of forced labor.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

There are laws and policies to protect children from exploitation in the workplace. The minimum age for employment is 16, but children may work from the age of 14 with permission of a parent or a guardian. Persons under 18 are prohibited from

working overtime; in harmful, strenuous, or dangerous conditions; at night; or on holidays.

There were few reports of child labor. According to the 2010 Armenia Demographic and Health Survey, 4 percent of children were involved in child labor, most of them in family businesses.

Also see the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at www.dol.gov/ilab/programs/ocft/tda.htm.

d. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The monthly minimum wage was 35,000 drams (\$86.20). According to 2011 official data, the extreme poverty line was 21,306 drams (\$52.46) and the general poverty line was drams 29,856 (\$73.53).

The law provides for a 40-hour workweek, 20 days of mandatory annual leave, and compensation for overtime and nighttime work. The law provides that compulsory overtime cannot exceed four hours in two consecutive days and 180 hours within a year. Authorities did not effectively enforce these standards. Many private sector employees were unable to obtain paid leave and were required to work more than eight hours a day without additional compensation. According to representatives of some employment agencies, many employers also continued to hire employees for a "probationary" period of 10 to 30 days, during which they were not paid. Often these employees were subsequently dismissed and unable to claim payment for the time they worked because their initial employment was undocumented.

Occupational and health standards were established by government decree. The State Labor Inspectorate, with its 126 inspectors, was responsible for enforcing these standards but did not do so effectively. During the year the State Labor Inspectorate reportedly made little progress toward implementing an inspection regime or enforcing the labor code, and its work was reportedly undermined by corruption. Observers noted that the State Labor Inspectorate did not have sufficient resources or staff. Inspectors primarily concentrated on social security payments and other tax-related issues instead of safety standards and protection of workers' rights. Parallel inspections with the State Revenue Commission, responsible for tax collection, were common. Managers of enterprises that were the primary employers in certain poor areas frequently took advantage of the absence of alternative jobs and neglected issues related to adequate pay, job safety,

and environmental concerns. Workers in the informal sector were excluded from any form of governmental protection.

Work safety and health conditions remained substandard in numerous sectors, and there were several fatal workplace incidents during the year.