

2014 Human Rights Report Introduction

On the first Sunday in August, the terrorist organization **Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)** descended on the towns and villages that are the ancient home of the Yezidi people, one of many small ethno-religious minorities that has lived for centuries in the diverse lands encompassed by Iraq and the Levant. They attacked and killed hundreds of men, women, and children simply because of their faith. Some were shot in the back while fleeing; others were buried alive. Thousands of women were taken captive as sex slaves. The bodies of many of the victims were later found in mass graves. Escapees undertook a week-long journey on foot that ended atop a desolate mountain in the area of Sinjar in northwestern Iraq. Defenseless, lacking food or water, and besieged by ISIL, the remaining survivors of the Yezidi community faced terrible atrocities and what President Obama called “a potential act of genocide.” Kurdish forces, aided by U.S. airstrikes, forged a path to safety. ISIL’s advance through Iraq and Syria claimed many other victims – Christians, Turkomans, Shabak, Shia and Sunni Muslims – as it resurrected, as a core tenet of its ideology, the most terrifying practices of medieval warfare and conquest.

While our reports continue to focus on the behavior of governments – which bear responsibility for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in their territories – the year 2014 will be remembered as much for atrocities committed by non-state actors. **The brutality of these actors is one of the notable trends in the 2014 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.**

Terrorist organizations like **ISIL**, **al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)**, **al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)**, **Boko Haram**, **al-Shabaab**, **Jabhat al-Nusra**, and others perpetrated human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law against innocent non-combatants. Often, they sought to eliminate those who did not conform to their extreme views, including other Sunni Muslims. Some governments committed violations and abuses in response; such reactions to violent extremism often undermined efforts to contain it.

In **Syria**, government security forces and affiliated militias committed massacres, bombarded civilian neighborhoods, mistreated and abused prisoners, and employed rape as a weapon of war. **ISIL** and **al-Nusra** took advantage of the chaos by casting themselves as the best available defense to Assad’s atrocities, while committing a wide range of similar abuses of their own, including massacres, bombings, summary executions, and forced displacement based on sectarian

identity. In the eastern provinces of Raqqa and Dayr al-Zawr, ISIL committed mass atrocities including executing up to 900 members of the al-Sheitaat tribe from Dayr al-Zawr. The terrorist group stoned women and men accused of adultery, crucified civilians, imposed forced marriage, raped kidnapped girls and women for the purpose of sexual slavery, and beheaded foreign journalists and aid workers, circulating videos of these crimes on social media.

In **Iraq**, in a systematic and widespread fashion, **ISIL** attacked individuals based on religion or ethnicity, raped women and children, and recruited child soldiers, while Shia militias and volunteers in Popular Mobilization Committees perpetrated violence and criminal acts. Widespread corruption and the government's inability to rein in abusive actions by security forces and militias led to popular mistrust in the government. Prime Minister Abadi has pledged, however, to tackle these problems.

In **Nigeria**, **Boko Haram** attacks resulted in the deaths of more than 4,000 civilians in 2014 alone, and the displacement of tens of thousands. In April, Boko Haram kidnapped 273 girls from the Chibok Government Girls Secondary School; most of the girls were still missing at year's end. Deadly attacks and abductions in neighboring **Cameroon** expanded the terrorist group's reach across Nigerian borders. Regional and international partners mobilized to respond, but high levels of corruption within the Nigerian military, along with the poor human rights record of Nigerian security services, undermined efforts to effectively combat Boko Haram.

In **Somalia** and **Kenya**, attacks by the terrorist group **al-Shabaab** continued throughout the year, killing many civilians. In December, the **Pakistani Taliban** committed the worst atrocity against schoolchildren in Pakistan in a decade – by killing, at times execution-style, 132 students. In **South Sudan**, government and opposition forces used an estimated 10,000 children to perpetuate the country's internal conflict, which has displaced over 1.5 million people.

In **Yemen**, **AQAP** kidnapped for ransom and continued to attack civilians with suicide bombers, causing numerous deaths. In **Algeria**, attacks by **AQIM** killed innocent civilians.

At the same time, authoritarian states continued to use violence or regressive laws to silence domestic dissidents, sometimes in the name of fighting terrorism or foreign threats.

The human rights record of the **Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)** remained among the worst in the world and came under particular scrutiny this year. A report published in February by a United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) concluded that systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations have been and continue to be committed by the government of the DPRK, its institutions, and its officials. The report further concluded that in many cases, such violations constitute crimes against humanity. Defectors continued to report public executions, disappearances, arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture, and there were reports of severe punishment of repatriated refugees.

Russia's political system is increasingly authoritarian, and the government instituted a range of new measures to suppress dissent within its borders. The government passed new repressive laws and selectively and systematically employed existing laws to harass and prosecute non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media outlets, and other independent voices. Significant government pressure on independent media constrained coverage of numerous issues, especially the situation in Ukraine, LGBT issues, the environment, criticism of local or federal leadership, as well as secessionist or federalist topics.

In March, **Russian armed forces** occupied and attempted to annex the Crimean peninsula of Ukraine. The Russian occupation authorities persecuted members of the Tatar community, certain religious minorities, and others who opposed the occupation, in many cases forcing targets to flee the peninsula. In eastern **Ukraine**, Russian forces and Russia-backed separatists shelled urban areas and committed numerous other gross human rights abuses, including those involving killings and abductions. Over one million persons have been forced to leave the region.

In **Saudi Arabia**, authorities tried several human rights activists in specialized courts as terrorism suspects, executed an individual convicted of "sorcery," severely limited exercise of religious freedom, and continued to restrict women's opportunities through its guardianship system and driving ban.

Iran continued to severely restrict civil liberties, including the freedoms of assembly, speech, religion, and press, and to execute citizens at the second highest rate in the world after legal proceedings that frequently didn't respect Iran's own constitutional guarantee to due process or international legal norms.

Even as authoritarian governments become more aggressive in cracking down on freedom of expression, including through the use of new media, civil society is

emerging as an increasingly powerful actor on the international stage, as people in every country become more connected and better informed. **The unique role of technology in combatting as well as carrying out human rights violations is another trend evident in the 2014 human rights reports.**

This year, authoritarian governments used a number of overt means to control use of the internet within their borders. In 2014, according to a recent Freedom House report, 41 countries passed or proposed laws or regulations to punish or restrict speech online. In **Belarus**, Alyaksandr Lukashenka signed into law new amendments further restricting online news outlets.

Elsewhere, more and more governments increasingly blocked access to websites, including social media sites. In **Tajikistan**, the government blocked access to social media sites, including Facebook and YouTube, several times over the year. In **Turkey**, government authorities blocked YouTube and Twitter in the lead-up to local elections. In **China**, the government continued to block access to websites deemed controversial, such as those discussing Taiwan or the Dalai Lama, and in December, media outlets reported that Gmail, the world's largest e-mail service provider, saw its traffic in China reduced to zero when large numbers of users were blocked. Following the outbreak of student protests in **Hong Kong** in September, censorship authorities in the Mainland reportedly blocked the photo-sharing social media site Instagram. And in **Ecuador**, a law firm is using copyright protection laws to target content on social media sites that is critical of the government.

In many countries, human rights activists who used the internet to express themselves were tried as criminals and punished as terrorists. In **Saudi Arabia**, the Ministry of Interior's Specialized Criminal Court, a court originally set up to try terrorists, tried and sentenced internet activist Raif Badawi to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes for exercising his rights to freedom of expression and religion. Another activist, Waleed Abu al-Khair, was sentenced by the same court to 15 years in prison July 7. In **Kuwait**, Abdullah Fayrouz was sentenced to five years in prison followed by permanent exile for "defaming the emir" via Twitter.

In **Vietnam**, authorities continued to suppress peaceful expression online through politically motivated arrests and convictions of bloggers, as well as through short-term detentions, illicit surveillance, intimidation, and illegal confiscations of computers and cell phones of activists and their family members.

At the same time, a number of civil society organizations (CSOs) are successfully advocating the protection of rights online and developing technologies to enable the exercise of freedom of expression and to call out human rights abuses.

For example, CSOs from across Africa came together to draft the African Declaration of Internet Rights and Freedoms to promote human rights standards and principles for internet freedom on the continent. In addition, new technologies have been developed to allow citizens to communicate and organize freely. And many non-state actors have demonstrated that legitimate concerns about hate speech on the internet can be combatted effectively without resorting to government censorship or restrictions. For example, civil society groups in **Burma** raised concerns about anti-Muslim hate speech online and worked with social and religious leaders to respond with messages undermining the arguments of the purveyors of hateful material.

Civil society and NGOs have been using satellite imagery, video, and crowdsourcing technologies to gather information and document human rights abuses in areas where security and accessibility have made such reporting challenging in recent years. For example, in August 2014, Amnesty International released video of alleged security force members slitting the throats of detainees and disposing of the bodies in mass graves in north-east **Nigeria**. This past year, Human Rights Watch and other organizations used video footage, satellite imagery, and posts on social media to document ongoing human rights abuses in **Syria** and map the movements of **ISIL** and other terrorist groups.

Technology is being used to verify data and help provide governments and the United Nations with accurate information regarding protests, destruction, and violence in countries around the world. It is also being used to help increase transparency.

For example, the broadening adoption of electronic salary payments has helped decrease late payments and wage theft, the most common issues faced by migrant workers. In 2014, **Saudi Arabia** and **Oman** increased the number of enterprises covered by such systems, following the example set by the **United Arab Emirates**.

In 2014, corruption prevailed in too many societies and too many unrestrained rulers used it to cement their overall grip on power. **The growing recognition of the correlation between corruption, human rights abuses, and repressive governance is the third trend noted in these reports.**

In **Russia**, corruption was widespread throughout the executive, legislative, and judicial branches at all levels of government. Its manifestations included bribery of officials, misuse of budgetary resources, theft of government property, kickbacks in the procurement process, extortion, and improper use of official position to secure personal profits.

In **China**, despite a high-profile anti-corruption campaign, corruption remained rampant, and many cases of corruption involved areas heavily regulated by the government, such as land usage, real estate, mining, and infrastructure development. Citizens and civil society members who promoted independent efforts to combat corruption were themselves prosecuted. For example, throughout 2014 the government convicted at least 10 persons associated with the New Citizens Movement on charges stemming from activities to promote transparency and good governance.

In **Venezuela**, corruption reduced the effectiveness of the security forces and undermined the independence of its judiciary. The government frequently investigated and selectively prosecuted its political opponents on corruption charges to harass, intimidate, and imprison them.

In **Sri Lanka**, nepotism and cronyism continued, with loyalists to the now former ruling party allegedly receiving favored consideration for high-ranking government and business positions. Anti-corruption messages became a hallmark of the successful opposition political campaign in the run-up to the January 2015 elections.

Similarly, in **Nigeria**, widespread corruption continued unchecked, weakening governance, damaging the country's economy, and undermining Nigeria's ability to protect its citizens and effectively combat Boko Haram. Although the law provides criminal penalties for corruption, the outgoing Nigerian government, which was defeated in the March 2015 elections, did not implement the law effectively, and officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity.

The ultimate test for any country – with respect to human rights and democracy – is the ability to view itself critically and hold itself accountable, addressing challenges and correcting imperfections by pursuing ongoing reform in a transparent manner. The United States must also comply with its human rights obligations. We do not include our own record in this report because we cannot be objective observers of our own behavior. But we welcome scrutiny by human

rights groups, other governments, and multilateral organizations. We are mindful of, and take seriously, advice from domestic and international civil society about how we can improve. In 2014, we engaged in extensive multi-agency consultations with domestic civil society and human rights organizations in preparation for the submission of our second report to the Universal Periodic Review process at the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2015.

Our longstanding commitment to promoting and defending human rights is also reflected in this annual publication of the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*.

COUNTRY HIGHLIGHTS

Afghanistan

In 2014, Afghanistan witnessed its first democratic transfer of power after holding presidential and provincial elections April 5, with a second presidential runoff-round held June 14. Reports of fraud marred the second round and led to an audit of all ballot boxes. Protracted political negotiations between the presidential candidates resulted in the creation of a national unity government with Ashraf Ghani as president and Abdullah Abdullah in the newly created post of chief executive officer. There was continued instability in the country, where the government is still fighting an active insurgency. The most significant problem was continued attacks on civilians by insurgent groups. Eight journalists were killed over the year, making it the deadliest year for the media since 2001. Violent and brutal attacks against women continued, including on elected female government officials during the year. There were ongoing human rights abuses committed by security forces.

Azerbaijan

In 2014, there was an increase in violence along the Line of Contact and the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, and separatists, with Armenia's support, continued to control most of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven other Azerbaijani territories. As a result of the unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, more than 600,000 persons remained displaced. Government restrictions on the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association increased, including intimidation, incarceration on reportedly questionable charges, and harassment of human rights defenders, civil society activists, and journalists. Authorities utilized a variety of measures to further narrow the operating space for human rights activists and NGOs. As a result of the increasingly restrictive environment and pressure, many NGOs were unable to function, about 30 reportedly ceased their operations, and at least three organizations had closed their offices as of November. The government used the judicial system to punish peaceful dissent, and there were increased reports of arbitrary arrest and detention, politically motivated imprisonment, and lengthy pretrial detention for individuals perceived as a threat by government officials. Allegations of widespread corruption continued, although the government took steps to reduce petty corruption at the local level.

Bangladesh

Following a series of tragic factory accidents in previous years that killed more than 1,000 workers, 2014 saw unprecedented scrutiny of the Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry. New coalitions of multinational companies, international

organizations, and labor rights groups worked with the Government of Bangladesh toward improving worker safety in thousands of garment factories. Significant concerns remain, however, with respect to workers' rights to freely associate and collectively bargain. Violence, intimidation, and harassment against labor activists continued throughout the year. After months of political turmoil and violence in late 2013, the parliamentary elections held in January 2014 were flawed. The opposition and its allies engaged in a series of violent strikes before boycotting the election. The ruling party won the elections with more than half the seats uncontested. There were also reports of extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances, as well as restrictions on online speech and the media. Women suffered from unequal treatment and many children were compelled to work due to economic necessity or trafficking. Weak regard for the rule of law enabled individuals, including government officials, to commit human right violations and abuses with impunity and hindered individuals' enjoyment of their human rights.

Belarus

In Belarus, citizens remained unable to change their government through elections. The government restricted the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, association, and religion or belief. Authorities harassed civil society activists and independent media with fines and jail time. In a system bereft of checks and balances, persons reportedly remained imprisoned on politically motivated charges, while the government failed to account for longstanding cases of politically motivated disappearances. Authorities harassed and discriminated against LGBT persons, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and those who sought to use the Belarusian language. Workers were unable to independently associate and could be fired for union or political activity without effective recourse or remedy.

Burma

In 2014, human rights abuses in Rakhine State remained a severely troubling counterpoint to the broader trend of progress since 2011. There continued to be a lack of civilian control over the military. The government did not establish a fair process for granting access to full citizenship rights on an equal, nondiscriminatory basis, especially for the Rohingya. Authorities in Rakhine State made no meaningful efforts to help Rohingya and other Muslim minority persons displaced by violence to return to their homes and continued to enforce disproportionate restrictions on their movement. The government also severely restricted humanitarian access to Rakhine State and did little to address the root causes of violence and discrimination. Forced labor, including that of children, persisted, although to a lesser degree than in the past. Although the unlawful recruitment and

use of child soldiers continued, the military has released 552 child soldiers since the government signed a joint action plan with the UN in June 2012, indicating an accelerated effort to end this practice. The government continued efforts to improve the legal framework for labor rights, but nonetheless faced significant capacity constraints. In 2014, together with the Governments of the United States, Japan, and Denmark, and the International Labor Organization (ILO), Burma launched the Initiative to Promote Fundamental Labor Rights and Practices in Myanmar. The initiative will help modernize Burma's labor code, improve compliance with international labor standards, and foster a robust dialogue between the government, business, labor, and civil society. Other significant problems included rape and sexual violence, particularly in conflict areas, politically motivated arrests, and an overall lack of rule of law resulting in corruption and widespread land confiscation without adequate compensation or recourse. Authorities continued to enforce a number of laws restricting enjoyment of freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, religion, and movement.

China

In 2014, repression and coercion by the Chinese government continued to be routine, particularly against organizations and individuals involved in civil and political rights advocacy and public interest issues, members of ethnic minorities, and law firms that took on sensitive cases. As in previous years, citizens lacked the ability to change their government and had limited forms of redress against official abuse. Authorities continued to censor and tightly control public discourse on the internet and severely restricted the freedoms of expression, religion, association, and peaceful assembly of Uighurs and Tibetans in specific areas. Although authorities prosecuted a number of abuses of power through the court system, particularly with regard to corruption, in most cases the Chinese Communist Party first investigated and punished officials using opaque and selectively applied internal Party disciplinary procedures. Citizens who promoted independent efforts to combat abuses of power, transparency, and good governance were themselves prosecuted. Poor enforcement of workplace safety standards continued to pose a threat to the lives and health of workers. An explosion in August at a factor in Zhejiang province resulted in the death of 146 workers, even though the municipal government had completed a round of safety inspection a week earlier and reportedly found no violations.

Cuba

In 2014, the Cuban government reportedly used threats, physical assault, intimidation, violent government-organized counter-protests against peaceful dissent, harassment, and detentions to restrict the freedoms of expression and

peaceful assembly. Civil society recorded the highest number of arbitrary, short-term detentions over the last five years at nearly 9,000. In the context of the December 17 announcement that diplomatic relations would be re-established between the United States and Cuba, the Cuban government released 53 individuals who we and others in the international community considered to be political prisoners, and it indicated its willingness to allow greater access by the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The government continued to block its citizens' access to uncensored, independent information in general, to severely restrict the availability of the internet, and to block certain blogs and websites for those few Cubans with access to the internet, although at year's end it indicated a willingness to consider expanding telecommunications investment on the island, opening up the possibility of greater internet access in the future.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)

In 2014, the government continued to subject citizens to rigid controls over most aspects of their lives, including denial of enjoyment of freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, association, movement, and religion or belief. It limited enjoyment of workers' rights, and denied citizens the ability to change their government. Satellite imagery corroborated defector reports that the government maintained a network of political prison camps in which conditions were inhuman, and prisoners were subjected to forced labor and not expected to survive. Defectors continued to report public executions, disappearances, arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture, and there were reports of severe punishment of repatriated refugees. Refugees and workers crossing the border into China were vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation. The DPRK human rights record came under particularly careful scrutiny this year. A report published in February by a Commission of Inquiry (COI), established by the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva in 2013, concluded that systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations have been and continue to be committed by the DPRK, its institutions, and its officials. The report further concluded that in many cases, such violations constitute crimes against humanity.

Egypt

In 2014, the most significant human rights abuses involved excessive use of force by security forces and the suppression of civil liberties, including restrictions on the enjoyment of freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. In most cases, the government did not comprehensively investigate human rights abuses, or investigations resulted in acquittals, perpetuating an environment of impunity. There were mass trials, in which evidence was not presented on individual bases; a new law expanded the jurisdiction of military courts to try

civilians; and there was increased use of lengthy pre-trial detention. The government arrested thousands of citizens engaged in anti-government protests, including secularist and Islamist activists who violated a restrictive law on demonstrations. Terrorist groups conducted deadly attacks on government, civilian, and security targets throughout the country, including schools, places of worship, and public transportation.

Iraq

Control over the security forces was inconsistent and the deterioration of the security situation led to a resurgence of Shia militias, which operated largely outside the authority of the Government of Iraq. ISIL committed the overwhelming number of serious human rights abuses. In a systematic and widespread fashion, ISIL targeted government officials and members of the security forces, as well as civilians, especially Shias, religious and ethnic minorities, women, and children. The United Nations estimated more than two million persons have been displaced nationwide since January. The humanitarian crisis worsened in July and August, as ISIL perpetrated gender-based violence, raped women and children, recruited child soldiers, and destroyed civilian infrastructure. There were increasing reports of violence and criminal acts perpetrated by Shia militias and volunteers in the Popular Mobilization Committees. Abuses by volunteer fighters have reportedly included kidnappings, extortion, and killings. Other human rights problems reported in 2014 include limits on the freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly, violence against and harassment of journalists, and limits on religious freedom. Widespread corruption at all levels of government and society exacerbated the lack of effective human rights protections in Iraq.

Nigeria

During the year, Boko Haram conducted numerous attacks on government and civilian targets throughout the country, resulting in thousands of deaths and injuries, widespread destruction, forced internal displacement, and the flight of more than 100,000 refugees to neighboring countries. During the year Boko Haram recruited and forcefully conscripted child soldiers, and it claimed responsibility for coordinated assaults on towns across Borno State. Three separate Boko Haram bombings in Abuja and its surrounding suburbs killed nearly 150 persons; a bombing in Jos, Plateau State, killed at least 118 persons; and bombings in Kaduna State killed approximately 80 persons. In response to Boko Haram, and at times to crime in general, security services perpetrated reported extrajudicial killings and torture, rape, arbitrary detention, mistreatment of detainees, and destruction of property. The country also suffered from widespread

societal violence, including ethnic, regional, and religious violence. Impunity remained widespread at all levels of government, and few persons were brought to justice for abuses and corruption. According to NGOs, the vigilante group known as the Civilian Joint Task Force continued to recruit children and kill suspected Boko Haram members. Other serious human rights problems included infringement on citizens' enjoyment of privacy rights and freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, religion, and movement. Violence against women; sexual exploitation of children, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, ethnicity, regional origin, religion, and disability; as well as forced and bonded labor remained significant problems throughout the year.

Pakistan

In Pakistan, a wide range of serious human rights problems persisted throughout 2014, including lack of rule of law and reported extrajudicial killings. Harassment of journalists and self-censorship continued, with high-profile attacks against journalists and media organizations. Government practices and laws limited enjoyment of freedom of religion, particularly for religious minorities, as well as restricted freedom of peaceful assembly and movement. Other human rights problems included reported disappearances, torture, and frequent mob and sectarian violence. Corruption within the government and police, as well as rape, domestic violence, "honor crimes," and discrimination against women and girls remained serious problems. Widespread human trafficking, including forced and bonded labor, as well as child abuse and commercial sexual exploitation of children persisted. Most of the nation's labor force was not covered by federal labor regulations of any kind and respect for worker rights was minimal. Human rights abuses often went unpunished, fostering a culture of impunity. Violence, abuse, and social and religious intolerance by militant organizations and other non-governmental actors contributed to a culture of lawlessness in some parts of the country.

Russia

In February, the country's armed forces unlawfully entered Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, then occupied and attempted to "annex" the peninsula in March. Thousands of civilian deaths and injuries, as well as widespread human rights abuses, were attributed to Russia-backed separatists in eastern parts of Ukraine and the Russian occupation authorities in Crimea. The conflict in Ukraine also resulted in a high degree of lawlessness along the country's border with Ukraine, notably associated with several high-profile abductions of Ukrainian citizens and the unrestricted movement of separatist militants and Russian government forces between Russia and Ukraine. The Russian government passed new repressive laws

and selectively employed existing ones to harass, discredit, imprison, and detain entities that engaged in activities critical of the government. Individuals and organizations that professed support for the Government of Ukraine or opposed the Russian government's activities in Ukraine were especially affected. The government also continued to discriminate against and politically prosecute LGBT persons, some religious and ethnic minorities, and migrant workers. Authorities reportedly used a variety of tactics, from canceling venues to multiple bomb threats, to interrupt LGBT gatherings and intimidate organizers and participants. Conflict in the North Caucasus between government forces, insurgents, Islamist militants, and criminal forces led to numerous human rights abuses and a general degradation in the rule of law. The country also suffered from widespread corruption.

Sudan

In Sudan, human rights abuses and violations included what was reported to be indiscriminate and deliberate bombing of civilian areas and armed attacks on civilians in Darfur and the Two Areas; attacks on humanitarian facilities; and extrajudicial killings. Clashes between government forces, government-armed militias, and Darfur rebel movements resulted in significant deaths on all sides. The armed opposition engaged in shelling of civilian targets that killed and injured civilians in the Two Areas. In January, President Bashir announced a National Dialogue to discuss democratic reforms with opposition parties and civil society; however, the government has so far failed to create an environment conducive to an open, inclusive, and comprehensive dialogue and has arrested opposition and civil society members.

South Sudan

In 2014, internal conflict continued to worsen in South Sudan, resulting in one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters and leading to numerous human rights abuses. Conflict between the government and opposition forces led by former Vice President Riek Machar Teny led to widespread violence – including ethnically targeted killings – and political instability. Both government and opposition forces targeted civilians and peace negotiations remained unresolved at year's end, leaving over 1.5 million people displaced. Throughout the year, security and opposition forces committed human rights violations and abuses, including killings and rape. The government also intimidated and harassed civil society, journalists, and dissenting political figures, while restrictions on enjoyment of freedoms of expression and association remained a severe problem. The government restricted the movement of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and NGOs, and attacks and harassment against UNMISS and

NGO workers increased. Violence and discrimination against women and children was widespread, corruption was pervasive, and impunity remained a major problem.

Syria

While the authoritarian regime of President Bashar Asad has governed Syria since 2000, armed groups have proliferated in major sections of territory in a civil war that began in 2012. The civil war, following peaceful protests against regime corruption, dictatorship, and human rights violations, continued throughout 2014. On June 29, ISIL announced the establishment of an Islamic “Caliphate” in Iraq and Syria, based in Raqqa city. The Asad regime continued to use deadly force against cities, residential areas, and civilian infrastructures, including schools, hospitals, mosques, churches, and houses throughout the country. As of November 1, there were more than 3.2 million refugees registered with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in neighboring states and North Africa, and a conservative estimate of more than 7.6 million persons displaced internally. The regime reportedly continued to conduct widespread torture and rape, including against children, and perpetuated massacres, forced displacement, and starvation. The government rigorously denied citizens the ability to exercise civil liberties, and corruption was rampant. Restrictions on the enjoyment of freedoms of religion and movement remained, and the regime consistently limited medical providers’ access to those in critical need. There were reports of increased human trafficking, forcible recruitment and use of children in the conflict, and forced marriages of women and girls for the purpose of sexual slavery for ISIL fighters. Impunity was pervasive and deeply embedded in the security forces and elsewhere in the government, and the regime reportedly often sheltered and encouraged those in its ranks to commit abuses. ISIL and armed terrorist groups also committed a wide range of abuses, including massacres, bombings, summary executions, forced evacuations from homes based on sectarian identity, and beheadings of foreign journalists and aid workers.

Thailand

In a bloodless coup May 22, military and police leaders, taking the name of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) and led by General Prayut Chan-Ocha, overthrew the interim government led by Yingluck Shinawatra of the Puea Thai political party. The coup leaders repealed the constitution (except for provisions related to the monarchy), suspended parliament, continued martial law imposed two days earlier on May 20, and issued numerous decrees that severely limited the exercise of civil liberties. These included restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, and press freedoms. The NCPO

summoned and detained, without charge, more than 900 political leaders, academics, journalists, and others, holding many for up to seven days. The NCPO promulgated an interim constitution July 22 and appointed individuals to a National Legislative Assembly July 31, the members of which unanimously selected coup leader and head of the army, General Prayut Chan-Ocha, as prime minister August 21.

Turkmenistan

In Turkmenistan, significant human rights problems included reported arbitrary arrest, torture, and restrictions on the enjoyment of freedoms of religion, expression, peaceful assembly, and movement. Citizens were unable to change the government through free and fair elections. Other problems included denial of due process, discrimination against women, and restrictions on the free association of workers. The government continued to censor newspapers and prohibit reporting of the views of political opposition or any criticism of the president. Domestic journalists and foreign news correspondents engaged in self-censorship due to fear of government reprisal. The law characterizes any opposition to the government as treason, and the judiciary was subordinate to the executive. Opposition groups and some international organizations stated that the government held political prisoners. Government officials, including those in the security services, engaged in corruption and abuse with impunity.

Uzbekistan

The most significant human rights problems in Uzbekistan included reported torture and abuse of detainees by security forces, widespread restrictions on the enjoyment of religious freedom, and an inability to change the government through elections. Government officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity, and authorities subjected human rights activists, journalists, and others who criticized their government, as well as their family members, to harassment and politically motivated prosecution and detention. Restrictions on the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association, as well as on civil society, remained a significant problem throughout the year. While government-organized forced child labor was significantly reduced in the 2014 annual cotton harvest, the government continued to forcibly mobilize adults to pick cotton.

Venezuela

Security forces and armed pro-government groups committed human rights abuses against participants in widespread protests that took place across the country, especially between February and May. There were reports of the use of force to break up anti-government protests, arbitrary detention, torture, and imprisonment

of protesters. The government arrested and imprisoned several opposition figures, blocked and co-opted media outlets, and harassed and intimidated journalists throughout the year using threats, fines, property seizures, targeted regulations, and criminal investigations. The government used the judiciary to intimidate and selectively prosecute political, civil society, union, and business leaders who were critical of government policies or actions. Government actions also impeded enjoyment of the freedom of expression and restricted press freedoms.

Vietnam

On January 1, 2014, the Government of Vietnam signed and promulgated significant amendments to the constitution, including a dedicated chapter on human rights, but the government has yet to enact implementing laws associated with this chapter. In 2014, the most significant human rights problems in the country remained severe restrictions on the enjoyment of political rights, including limits on citizens' ability to exercise their civil liberties. The government limited freedoms of religion, peaceful assembly, association, and movement, as well as suppressed dissent, restricted freedom of expression online and press freedom, and continued to limit privacy rights. While the number of independent NGOs grew substantially and with some tolerance by authorities, the government continued to sharply control registration of NGOs, including human rights organizations. There was continued police mistreatment of suspects during arrest and detention, denial of fair trial rights, the judicial system was opaque and lacked independence, and political and economic influences regularly affected judicial outcomes.