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COUNTRY SUMMARY

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

While the economy of the UAE continues its impressive growth, civil society continues to stagnate and human rights progress has been slow. Authorities have blocked the formation of independent human rights organizations and exerted censorial pressure on a wide range of social activists, impeding the kind of vigorous monitoring and reporting that can draw attention to and help curb human rights abuses.

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, 'Ajman, Al Fujayrah, Sharjah, Dubai, Ra's al- Khaymah, and Umm al-Qaywayn. The rulers of each emirate, sitting as the Federal Supreme Council, elect the president and vice president from among their number. The government announced in August 2006 that it would hold its first-ever elections for 20 of the 40 members of the Federal National Council, an advisory body to the president, in December 2006. The emir of each emirate chooses the candidates who can stand for election and the president of the UAE appoints the remaining council members.

The UAE has not signed most international human rights and labor rights treaties. Migrant workers, comprising nearly 90 percent of the workforce in the private sector, are particularly vulnerable to serious human rights violations.

Freedom of Association and Expression

The government approved the formation of the first human rights organization in the country, the Emirates Human Rights Association, in February 2006, but disputes among its board members kept the association from being fully functional at year's end.

The government actively discouraged the creation of other human rights organizations. In July 2004 a group led by lawyer Muhammad al-Roken applied to the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare for permission to establish the Emirates Human Rights Society. In April 2005 another group of 30 activists headed by human rights

campaigner Khalifa Bakhit al-Falasi applied to the ministry to set up another human rights association. According to the Associations Law, the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare is to reply to such requests within a month of their filing, but as of November 2006 the ministry had not responded to either application.

Since 2000, the government has barred 12 prominent UAE commentators and academics from disseminating their views. In 2006 the government increased its persecution and prosecution of human rights defenders. In June 2006 the Federal High Court issued an arrest warrant for Muhammad al-Mansoori, president of the independent Jurists Association, for allegedly “insulting the public prosecutor.” Security agents detained Muhammad al-Roken, a former president of the Jurists Association, for 24 hours in July and again in August for three days. On both occasions officials questioned him about his human rights activities and his public lectures. Security officials confiscated his passport and barred him from leaving the country. The government has also not recognized City of Hope, the country’s only shelter for abused women, children, and domestic workers. The organization’s director, Sharla Musabih, currently faces potential criminal prosecution in what she alleges to be a politically motivated case.

Migrant Labor

Nearly 80 percent of the UAE’s population are foreigners, and foreigners account for 90 percent of the workforce in the private sector, including domestic workers. As of May 2006, according to the Ministry of Labor, there were 2,738,000 migrant workers in the country. The UAE’s economic growth has attracted large domestic and foreign investments and the current construction boom is one of the largest in the world. Exploitation of migrant construction workers by employers, especially low-skilled workers in small firms, is particularly severe. Immigration sponsorship laws that grant employers extraordinary power over the lives of migrant workers are in part responsible for the continuing problem.

Abuses against migrant workers include nonpayment of wages, extended working hours without overtime compensation, unsafe working environments resulting in deaths and injuries, squalid living conditions in labor camps, and withholding of passports and travel documents.

The government failed in 2006 to put in place a minimum wage as required by the UAE Labor Law of 1980. 2006 saw an increasing number of public demonstrations by migrant workers protesting nonpayment of wages. Twenty-five hundred construction workers rioted in Dubai on March 21, 2006, demanding better working conditions and higher wages. In May 2006 thousands of construction workers working for Besix, a Brussels-based company, went on strike to demand an increase in their wage of US\$4 a day and better working conditions. The government deported 50 strikers.

In March the government announced that it would legalize trade unions by the end of 2006, but as of November 2006 it had taken no steps to do so. Instead, in September the government introduced a law banning any migrant worker who participates in a strike from employment in the country for at least one year.

Following a surge in heat-related illnesses and injuries at construction sites in July 2005, the Labor Ministry directed construction companies to give their workers a break from 12:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. during July and August. However, in July 2006, after intense lobbying by construction companies, the government reduced the afternoon break to the hours of 12:30 p.m. to 3 p.m. When asked about the reason for this change, Minister of Labor Ali bin Abdullah al-Kaabi told reporters, “The contractors should be asked about the reduction in the hours, as they are the ones who have decided the timings.”

Women domestic workers are often confined to their places of work, and are at particular risk of abuse, including unpaid wages, long working hours, and physical or sexual abuse.

Trafficking

According to the US State Department, human trafficking to the UAE is an endemic problem. Large numbers of young boys are annually trafficked to the UAE to be trained as camel jockeys, and in 2005 the UAE government estimated the number of children working as camel jockeys to be between 1,200 and 2,700; international organizations have put the numbers at 5,000-6,000. Responding to international criticism, UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan decreed in July 2005 that all camel jockeys must be age 18 or older. The law penalizes violators with jail terms of up to three years and/or fines of at least Dh50,000 (US\$13,600). In 2006

the government cooperated with UNICEF to identify and return 1,071 children to their home countries. The government also provided funds for their resettlement.

Key International Actors

The UAE has emerged as a major business and trading hub in the Middle East, attracting substantial foreign investments. The US, Japan, and the European Union are among the UAE's main trading partners. In April 2004 the UAE signed a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) with the US, and the two countries in November 2004 began negotiations toward a Free Trade Agreement. The UAE is also negotiating free trade agreements with the European Union and Australia.

In its 2006 annual report on human trafficking, the US State Department placed the UAE on its Tier 2 Watch List for its "failure to show increased efforts to combat trafficking over the past year, particularly in its efforts to address the large-scale trafficking of foreign girls and women for commercial sexual exploitation."

In October 2004 the UAE acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. However, it is not a signatory to other major international human rights instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and the Convention against Torture.