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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 exerted censorial pressure on a wide range of 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. In December 2006, the UAE held its first-ever elections for 20 seats in the 40-member Federal National Council (FNC), an advisory body to the president. Only members of the electoral colleges, a group of 6,595 UAE citizens chosen by the rulers of the emirates, were allowed to cast ballots and to stand as candidates. One woman was elected to the FNC, and the rulers of the emirates appointed seven other women as council members.

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 the organization has remained largely inactive.

The government has actively discouraged the creation of other human rights organizations. In July 2004 a group led by Muhammad al-Roken, a former president of the independent Jurists Association, 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 Khalifa Bakhit al-Falasi applied to the ministry to set up another human rights association. As of November 2007, the ministry had not responded to either application.

The UAE has barred prominent UAE commentators and academics from disseminating their views and harassed and prosecuted human rights activists. The government has imprisoned and punished journalists for expressing views critical of the government.

In August, a court sentenced Mohammad Rashed al-Shehhi, the owner of a popular website Majan.net, to one year in prison for defamation of a public official, ordered him to pay \$19,000 in damages, and closed down the website. In September, the court sentenced Khaled al-Asli to five months in prison for writing the website article in question. The court released Asli on bail pending his appeal. In September, a court sentenced two journalists working for the English-language daily Khaleej Times to two months in prison for libel, but released them on bail pending their appeal.

In September, UAE Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammad issued instructions "not to imprison journalists for reasons related to their work," but indicated that other measures should be taken to penalize journalists for "violations." On September 30, the prime minister ordered Shehhi's release on bail. It's unclear whether or not the charges will be dropped.

In June 2006, a Federal Supreme Court judge issued an arrest warrant for Muhammad al-Mansoori, president of the Jurists Association, for allegedly "insulting the public prosecutor." After spending most of 2007 outside of the country, Mansoori returned to the UAE in early September. The UAE government has reportedly warned him to cease his human rights advocacy.

Security agents detained Muhammad al-Roken twice in the summer of 2006, questioning him about his human rights activities. They also confiscated his passport and barred him from leaving the country. In January 2007, in what appears to be a politically-motivated case, a lower court sentenced Roken to three months in prison for sex out of wedlock. The sentence has been stayed and is currently on appeal. In May 2007, the government returned Roken's passport.

While it closed City of Hope, the country's only shelter for abused women, children, and domestic workers, the government has created a new quasi-governmental body called the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children, which will manage a facility providing the same services with capacity to house 260 people, a significant increase. City of Hope's former director Sharla Musabih is on the board of directors of the new organization, and the government has dropped what appears to have been a politically motivated criminal prosecution of her.

Migrant Labor

Roughly 85 percent of the UAE's population are foreigners, and foreigners account for nearly 99 percent of the workforce in the private sector, including domestic workers. As of August 2007, according to the Ministry of Labor, there were 4.5 million foreigners in the country, compared to 800,000 Emirati citizens. 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 is particularly severe. Immigration sponsorship laws that grant employers extraordinary power over the lives of migrant workers exacerbate the problem.

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

Over the course of 2007, the UAE has made incremental progress toward improving the conditions of migrant workers. Most significantly, a substantial number of employers have made improvements to workers' living quarters, including improving sanitary conditions and easing overcrowding. The ministry of labor also claims to have shut down over one-hundred companies that have violated labor laws, but has not divulged the names.

On February 5, in a step toward greater transparency, the ministry of labor published a draft of a revised labor law on the internet and invited public comment. The draft law falls far short of international standards in several critical areas. It contains no provisions on workers' rights to organize and to bargain collectively, it explicitly

allows authorities to punish striking workers, and it arbitrarily excludes from its purview all domestic workers employed in private households. The ministry had not indicated at this writing when the revised labor law would be enacted.

Women domestic workers are at particular risk of abuse, including food deprivation, forced confinement, and physical or sexual abuse. In April, the UAE introduced a standard contract for domestic workers which provides some protections, but contains no limit on working hours, no provisions for a rest day or overtime pay, no workers' compensation, and only provides for unspecified "adequate breaks" and one month of paid vacation every two years. The standard contract does not serve as an adequate substitute for extending equal protection to domestic workers under the labor law.

The government failed in 2007 to put in place a minimum wage as required by the UAE Labor Law of 1980.

In 2007, migrant workers continued to engage in public demonstrations to protest their treatment. In February 2007, 3000 construction workers went on strike for five days in Abu Dhabi. The strike ended when management agreed to raise daily wages, include pay for Fridays, and provide basic health insurance to workers. Following the strike, the ministry of labor ordered the expulsion from the country of 14 of the protest "instigators." Also, in February 2007, 300 to 400 construction workers blocked a busy highway in Dubai, protesting low wages, non-payment of wages, and substandard living conditions. The police ended the protest and escorted the workers back to their labor camps. In July 2007, the government sent in the armed forces to put an end to a four-day strike at a gas processing plant.

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. In the summer months, temperatures often reach 110 degrees Fahrenheit. 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., which remains in force.

Trafficking

According to the US State Department, human trafficking to the UAE for commercial sexual exploitation and involuntary servitude continues to be a serious problem. In its 2007 annual report on human trafficking, the US State Department placed the UAE on its Tier 2 Watch List for “failing to take meaningful steps to address the problem of foreign women trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation and of foreign male and female workers subjected to conditions of involuntary servitude.”

Until recently, the trafficking of young boys to the UAE to be trained as camel jockeys was a widespread problem. 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. In 2006 the government cooperated with UNICEF to identify and return 1,071 children to their home countries. In 2007, the UAE government continued to work with UNICEF to exclude all underage children in camel racing and to repatriate former underage camel jockeys.

Key International Actors

The UAE has emerged as a major business and trading hub in the Middle East, attracting substantial foreign investments. In April 2004 the UAE signed a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) with the US. The UAE is currently negotiating free trade agreements with the US, the European Union, and Australia.

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.