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COUNTRY SUMMARY

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

While the economy of the UAE continues to grow, human rights progress remains scant. Authorities censor and harass human rights activists, impeding independent reporting that could help curb abuses. Other forms of governmental accountability are minimal. Only 6,600 UAE citizens, chosen by the rulers of the emirates out of a population of roughly 900,000 citizens (and 4.7 million foreigners), can vote or stand for the 20 elected seats in the 40-seat Federal National Council, an advisory body to the president.

Freedom of Association and Expression

The only legally recognized human rights organization, the Emirates Human Rights Association, took up the cause of cancer patients facing workplace discrimination, but did little to address persistent human rights abuses by the government. As of October 2008 the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare had not responded to applications from 2004 and 2005 to establish other human rights organizations.

Human rights defenders and government critics face harassment, including criminal charges. According to Muhammad al-Mansoori, former president of the Jurists Association, charges against him from 2006 for allegedly “insulting the public prosecutor” were dropped, but revived in October 2007. Al-Mansoori sought to fight the charges in court but says the public prosecutor refuses to bring the case to trial. Al-Mansoori claims that officials warned him to cease his human rights advocacy, and have refused to renew his passport since March 2008.

In June 2005 authorities accused Hassan al-Diqqi, the founder of the unrecognized Emirates People’s Rights Organization, of raping a housekeeper. The charges aroused suspicion, coming two months after al-Diqqi established the “PRO Emirates” website. Al-Diqqi went into hiding and was sentenced to death in absentia in a 2005 trial in which forensic evidence did not support the charge, according to a

local rights activist and lawyer who saw the evidence. Sharjah police arrested al-Diqqi in July 2008 on the old rape charge. On August 5 a court ordered his release, and the next day an appeals court affirmed the release order, but then without explanation the first instance court rescinded its initial release decision. Al-Diqqi says authorities are harassing him because of his human rights activism.

Authorities arrested Salem Abdullah al-Dousari, a professor of religious education, on May 6 without explanation. According to the Geneva-based human rights organization Alkarama, he was detained in a psychiatric facility for three months without charge before being released.

In May the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that Sabihat Abdullah Sultan al-Alili was arbitrarily detained in February 2007 for exercising his right to freedom of expression. In October 2007 the Federal Supreme Court sentenced him to three years in prison for revealing state secrets. The Working Group noted that, at his trial, al-Alili was not allowed to speak, his lawyer was not allowed to plead, and a coerced confession was used against him.

According to lawyer and independent human rights activist Muhammad al-Roken, the government returned his passport in May 2007 but in 2008 the Ministry of Justice threatened to cancel his law license. Al-Roken received a three-month suspended sentence after being charged with sex out of wedlock in a politically motivated case in 2007.

Although Prime Minister Shaikh Muhammad decreed in 2007 that journalists should not face prison “for reasons related to their work,” a 1980 law still in force provides for the imprisonment of journalists and suspension of publication for publishing “materials that cause confusion among the public.” The government monitors press content, and journalists routinely exercise self-censorship. In July 2008, for example, *Al-Khaleej* newspaper refused to publish a column by `Abd al-Khaliq Abdullah on the growing demographic imbalance between foreign workers and Emiratis.

The government has targeted educators suspected of Islamist sympathies. In June, 83 teachers staged a protest 11 months after being removed from their positions,

without explanation, because of what the government said were their Islamist views. In July authorities without explanation banned law professors Ahmed Salah al-Hamadi and Seif al-Shamsi from resuming their teaching positions at the national university in al-Ain.

Prisons and Ill-Treatment

In a positive development, a former Dubai prison director and six jail wardens were sentenced to six-month prison terms for beating prisoners during an inspection for contraband in August 2007. Another 18 jail wardens involved in the abuse were sentenced to three-months.

Migrant Workers' Rights

Foreigners account for up to 85 percent of UAE residents and nearly 99 percent of the private-sector workforce. Immigration sponsorship laws grant employers extraordinary power over the lives of migrant workers. Laws in force, as well as a draft revised labor law made public in 2007 but not yet implemented, fail to protect workers' rights to organize and to bargain collectively, provide punishments for striking workers, and exclude from coverage domestic workers employed in private households. Although the Labor Law of 1980 calls for a minimum wage, in June 2008 the Ministry of Labor stated it had no plans to adopt such a measure.

Women domestic workers are at risk of unpaid wages, food deprivation, forced confinement, and physical or sexual abuse. In October 2008 two Filipina domestic workers tried to leave their employers' household, complaining of physical abuse and non-payment of wages. Their employers returned them to their recruitment agency, Al Doukhi Labour Supply Company, which detained them in a small kitchen "for days" before they escaped.

The standard contract for domestic workers introduced in April 2007 provides some protections and calls for unspecified "adequate breaks," but does not limit working hours or provide for a rest day, overtime pay, or workers' compensation. The government announced plans in late 2007 to draft a law protecting domestic workers, but this has yet to be finalized.

Exploitation of migrant construction workers is also severe. Abuses include nonpayment of wages, extended working hours without overtime compensation, unsafe working environments leading to deaths or illness, squalid living conditions in labor camps, and withholding of passports and travel documents.

In March, 1,500 workers with engineering contractor Drake and Scull went on a violent strike at a labor camp in Sharjah, destroying company offices, cars, and buses. Workers told local media they were protesting unpaid wages. In July police in Ras al-Khaima arrested more than 3,000 workers employed by the Al Hamra construction company after a riot reportedly sparked by anger at the poor quality of company-supplied food. Authorities detained most of those involved for 13 days, and the Labor Ministry ordered some “instigators” expelled from the country. Also in July, Sharjah police arrested 625 construction workers who blocked a road after they were denied promised housing and forced to sleep on construction sites. In October more than 3,000 workers of the ETA Contracting Company in Abu Dhabi went on strike to protest delayed payments and demand wage increases needed to meet food costs after the company banned workers from cooking their own meals.

The Labor Ministry mandated an afternoon break for workers on outdoor construction sites from 12:30 to 3 p.m. during July and August, when temperatures often exceed 43 degrees Celsius. In July 2005 the ministry had directed companies to give workers a four-hour break, but reduced it to two-and-a-half hours due to company lobbying. Heat exhaustion cases have reportedly decreased overall, although in August 2008 a hospital in Dubai reported receiving an increased number of construction workers suffering heat exhaustion during the mandated break period, suggesting some companies violated the law.

In August 2008 public health authorities in Dubai stated that 40 percent of that emirate’s 1,093 labor camps violated minimum health and fire safety standards. That same month, 11 construction workers died when the 30-room Dubai residence where 500 workers were illegally housed caught fire; some had to jump out of windows due to blocked exits. In June a chickenpox outbreak in a Sharjah labor camp was linked to unhygienic conditions and workers’ inability to afford vaccines.

Workers died on the job due to apparently unsafe working conditions. In June three Indian employees of Seidco General Contracting were killed when a basement ceiling collapsed at a hotel construction site in Ajman; a police chief said the scaffolding was unable to take the weight of the concrete. In September Abu Dhabi police blamed “lax safety procedures” for the deaths of two Pakistani workers when a well they were digging collapsed.

The UAE has not ratified core International Labour Organization conventions protecting freedom of association and the right to organize, which includes the right to strike and the right to collective bargaining.

In May the UAE released its first annual report on trafficking, dedicated substantial funds to counter-trafficking efforts, and publicly acknowledged that trafficking takes place. In its 2008 annual report on human trafficking the United States State Department listed the UAE as a Tier 2 country, taking it off its Watch List. The UAE government has yet to take crucial measures to fight trafficking and forced labor, however, such as major reform of inadequate labor and immigration laws, stronger monitoring of recruitment agencies, screening for trafficking, and prosecutions for trafficking into forced labor.

Key International Actors

The UAE cooperates with the United States on security matters. The US Navy routinely uses the Dubai port of Jebel Ali. In December 2007 the Bush administration notified the US Congress of the possible sale to the UAE of several air defense missile systems as well as various munitions. On July 28, 2008, the US returned to the UAE Abdullah al-Hamiri, a UAE national who had been detained at Guantanamo Bay.

In a bid to increase the UAE’s food security, the Abu Dhabi Development Fund announced plans to buy and develop farmland in several countries, including tens of thousands of hectares in Sudan, and possible projects in Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

The UAE was reviewed under the Universal Periodic Review mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council in December 2008.