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# 2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Armenia

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There were some significant positive changes regarding the government's commitment to human rights in Armenia. The government increased the legal age for marriage to 18, eliminating exceptions for certain instances of child marriage. The government and the ombudsman promptly responded to the single antisemitic incident in the country, providing sharp and public condemnation of antisemitism in any form.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest and detention; and significant presence of any of the worst forms of child labor.

The government took limited credible steps to identify and punish former and sitting government officials who committed human rights abuses. There was no reported progress on government investigations of alleged abuses committed by armed forces or individuals during hostilities in 2020.

Section 1.

## Life

### a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year.

Human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) expressed concerns regarding multiple reports of noncombat deaths in the army and allegations law enforcement bodies failed to conduct credible investigations into those deaths. According to civil society organizations and victims' families, the practice of qualifying many noncombat deaths as suicides at the onset of investigations made it less likely abuses would be uncovered and investigated. According to human rights lawyers, the biggest obstacle to the investigation of military deaths was the destruction or nonpreservation of key evidence, both by the military command (in cases of internal investigations) and by the specific investigation body working on a case. According to human rights NGOs, the government's lack of transparency in reporting on military deaths, whether classified as combat or noncombat, led to public distrust of official information in this sphere.

Human rights lawyers asserted there was no progress on investigations into noncombat deaths in the military despite multiple rulings by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ordering the government to investigate.

The government reported the investigations into the deaths of two persons who allegedly jumped to their deaths from windows while in police custody in April and July 2023 continued during the year. No officers were charged at year's end.

## **b. Coercion in Population Control**

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

## **c. War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity, and Evidence of Acts that May Constitute Genocide, or Conflict-Related Abuses**

Sporadic allegations of incidents of limited cross-border firing in the decades-long conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan impacted civilians during the year. The Armenian government accused Azerbaijani Armed Forces of repeated attacks on civilian infrastructure. On November 11, Freedom House published a report alleging the Azerbaijani government acted upon a comprehensive, methodically implemented strategy to empty Nagorno-Karabakh of its ethnic Armenian population between 2020 and 2023, subjecting the population in Nagorno-Karabakh to attacks, intimidation, deprivation of basic rights and adequate living conditions, and forced displacement. The report recommended parties “continue pursuing international legal avenues to seek accountability measures and remedies...includ[ing] ongoing efforts at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the European Court of Human Rights.”

Complaints submitted by the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan to the ECHR alleging the other side committed atrocities during 2016-20 fighting awaited the court’s ruling, as did the Armenian government’s claims regarding September 2022 fighting.

Following the mass exodus from Nagorno-Karabakh of virtually all of the region’s ethnic Armenians in late September 2023, the ICJ instructed Azerbaijan to ensure the safe, unimpeded, and expeditious return of those who wished to return to Nagorno-Karabakh and the protection of persons in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian government’s investigation into crimes, including killings allegedly committed by Azerbaijan against Nagorno-Karabakh residents, originally announced following the flight of more than 100,000 ethnic Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh residents into Armenia in 2023, continued at year’s end.

There were no updates on the six criminal cases launched by Armenian authorities in 2020 to investigate actions of perpetrators speaking Armenian during the fall 2020 intensive fighting on charges of “serious violations of international humanitarian law during armed conflicts.” Of the six cases, four involved alleged murder, torture, and inhuman treatment; one involved alleged murder and torture; and one involved alleged murder. The government combined all six cases into one criminal proceeding in 2021. The investigation remained underway at year’s end.

Section 2.

## **Liberty**

### **a. Freedom of the Press**

The constitution and law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media. The government generally respected this right, with some exceptions.

Individuals were generally free to criticize the government without fear of reprisal; however, there were some exceptions involving human rights defenders.

### **Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure**

Journalists at times were subjected to violence, harassment, or intimidation by authorities or those acting on behalf of authorities. The NGO Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression reported an increase in the number of cases of physical violence against journalists during the second quarter of the year against a backdrop of political protests in the country.

Journalists, particularly those from independent media outlets, reported facing significant pressure and threats both online and in person for their coverage of high-level government corruption and for posing questions aimed at holding government officials accountable. In its May 3 *World Press Freedom Index*, Reporters Without Borders noted antimedia rhetoric from political elites, who accused journalists of “corruption” and of serving their adversaries, fostered a climate of intolerance that impeded the work of reporters in the country.

On June 12, during protests calling for the prime minister’s resignation, members of the press corps alleged police directed stun grenades in their direction and broke their equipment, and that some sustained physical injuries after being pushed during police clashes with protesters. Multiple media associations condemned the actions of police, citing videos and photographs they claimed showed officers targeting reporters and camera operators covering the protest.

### **Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups**

The media environment was politically polarized. Most media outlets faced financial challenges and demonstrated increased political polarization, as they reflected the views of their sponsors, whether those were groups tied to former authorities, opposition parties, or the government. This created a difficult financial environment which, while devoid of overt censorship, left an uneven media playing field.

## **b. Worker Rights**

### **Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining**

The law protected the right of all workers to form and to join independent unions.

The law provided for the right to strike, with some exceptions, and permitted collective bargaining. Labor law experts assessed the many legal requirements rendered legal strikes impossible, however.

The law prohibited antiunion discrimination and stipulated worker rights could not be restricted due to union membership and workers could not be fired for union activity. On July 18, the Yerevan Trial Court reinstated the right of the head of the trade union at the Pure Iron Plant to enter the plant’s premises. The plant previously denied access to the union head following her successful lawsuit against the plant for wrongful termination. According to media reports by *Epress.am*, since 2021 plant leadership took several actions against the trade union, including refusing to sign a collective contract with employees, pressuring employees to quit the union, and dismissing the head of the trade union.

The government did not effectively enforce laws protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, or the right to strike for workers. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those for other denials of civil rights. With respect to freedom of association and collective bargaining, penalties were rarely applied against violators. Labor organizations were weak. Observers noted employer resistance, high unemployment, and poor economic conditions were likely contributing factors. With respect to the right to strike, there were no reports of penalties applied against violators.

### **Forced or Compulsory Labor**

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## Acceptable Work Conditions

### Wage and Hour Laws

The law provided a monthly minimum wage above the poverty income level. The law provided for a 40-hour workweek, 20 days of mandatory paid annual leave, and compensation for overtime and nighttime work. The law prohibited compulsory overtime in excess of four hours on two consecutive days and limited it to 180 hours in a year.

Violations of wage, hour, or overtime laws were common for many employees of private companies, particularly in the service and retail sectors. These employees were often unable to obtain paid leave and were required to work more than eight hours a day and during weekends and holidays without additional compensation.

### Occupational Safety and Health

The government established occupational safety and health (OSH) standards by decree. Safety and health conditions were not generally appropriate for the main industries of the country and remained substandard in numerous sectors. For example, in the agricultural sector, heat and the use of pesticides were unaddressed. Although workers could remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, due to high unemployment in the country, workers generally did not do so and were unlikely to report violations of their rights. The Health and Labor Inspection Body (HLIB) and the employer were responsible for identifying unsafe situations in the workplace; the HLIB proactively identified such conditions.

Using data from the HLIB, the ombudsperson's 2023 report discussed numerous instances of OSH violations on construction sites, including the absence of appropriate clothing and protective gear and equipment, hygiene and rest stations, and routine medical checks for workers in dangerous conditions. There were regular media reports of deadly incidents at construction sites.

### Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The HLIB was responsible for the enforcement of the labor code, including minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws, but the government did not effectively enforce these laws. The number of labor inspectors was sufficient to enforce compliance. Inspectors could not make unannounced inspections but could initiate sanctions. Penalties for violations of wage and hour laws were commensurate with those for similar crimes. Penalties were regularly applied against violators.

The informal sector comprised an estimated 15 percent of the total workforce, not including self-employment in the agricultural field. The government did not have jurisdiction to inspect "nonlegal" employers such as small farms or illegal businesses. Authorities did not effectively enforce labor laws in either the formal or informal sectors.

## c. Disappearance and Abduction

### Disappearance

There were no reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) worked to clarify the number of persons missing in connection with the international armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to the ICRC, approximately 5,000 Armenians and Azerbaijanis remained unaccounted for, including many who had been missing since the 1990s. Of the total figure, 761 were Armenians. According to the government, 193 persons (including 20 civilians) were considered missing after the fall 2020 fighting. There were 42 missing Armenians following the September 2023 offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh (including 12 civilians).

### **Prolonged Detention without Charges**

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government did not always observe these requirements.

According to human rights lawyers, police occasionally arrested individuals without formal charges as a form of punishment. Lawyers stated court detention decisions were unpredictable, with different restrictions placed on defendants in similar circumstances.

Observers indicated police at times avoided granting individuals their due process rights by summoning and holding, rather than formally arresting persons under the pretext they were material witnesses, not suspects. Police were thereby able to question individuals without giving them the benefit of a defense attorney. This practice was particularly evident outside the capital.

On November 13, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) published a report on its September 2023 visit to the country. In it, the CPT noted improved legal safeguards. In particular, the CPT noted the previous practice of “informal talks” with police had been nearly eliminated, although police officers still occasionally questioned apprehended persons on basic factual elements related to the suspected criminal offense without the presence of a defense lawyer.

### **d. Violations in Religious Freedom**

See the Department of State’s annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>.

### **e. Trafficking in Persons**

See the Department of State’s annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3.

## **Security of the Person**

### **a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment**

The constitution and law prohibited such practices, but there were credible reports government officials employed them. The local NGO community expressed concern regarding allegations that members of the security forces tortured or otherwise abused individuals in their custody with impunity. According to human rights lawyers, while the criminal code defined and criminalized torture, it did not criminalize other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Officials often

investigated allegations of torture under charges of abuse of power, leading to lighter punishments. On July 25, the Court of Cassation ruled investigative bodies had not effectively investigated allegations of torture and noted lower courts had failed to properly take into consideration the lack of investigation when deciding judicial cases.

Human rights organizations and activists asserted military police subjected military personnel to mistreatment, abuse, and possibly torture. They noted when the army investigated allegations of torture and abuse, officials used articles of the criminal code specific to regulating military service rather than articles specific to torture. According to human rights activists, by using this special section of the criminal code, military officials reduced legal safeguards and allowed for dismissal of cases based on the expiration of the statute of limitations.

On May 20, trial court judge Masis Melkonyan ruled the investigation body did not conduct an effective investigation into allegations of torture by police in a 2022 case involving one citizen forcibly detained and allegedly subjected to violence while staging a peaceful protest. The Prosecutor General's Office had rejected an initial report indicating torture could have occurred, prompting the victims to seek judicial recourse. Melkonyan stated the decision not to initiate criminal prosecution violated the victims' rights and hindered an effective investigation into the torture allegations.

Human rights activists asserted impunity for old and new instances of police abuse contributed to the continuation of abuse, and they alleged perpetrators often remained in their positions or, in some cases, were promoted.

On April 16, media reported possible police complicity in the abuse of antigovernment activist Samvel Vardanyan following his April 15 arrest for allegedly harassing a parliamentarian from the ruling Civil Contract party on a bus. According to Vardanyan's lawyers, while he was being transported by police from the Investigative Committee to a police detention cell, authorities stopped the car and police stepped out. Masked individuals in plain clothes then allegedly dragged Vardanyan out of the car, knocked him to the ground, cursed, threatened, beat, abused, and humiliated him before throwing him back into the car. According to media reports, on April 18, the Investigative Committee launched an official investigation.

Criminal justice bodies relied on confessions and information obtained during questioning to secure convictions. According to human rights lawyers, procedural safeguards against mistreatment during police questioning, such as inadmissibility of evidence obtained through force or procedural violations, were insufficient. According to human rights lawyers, while many cases occurred in Yerevan, the failure to follow these procedural safeguards was more common in regional police stations.

In its November 13 report, the CPT stated most of the persons interviewed by the delegation who had recently been in police custody stated they had been “treated correctly” by police. The delegation, however, also heard allegations of mistreatment of persons detained by police, including reports of the excessive use of force during the apprehension of suspects and during initial questioning in police stations by both uniformed and plain clothed officials. The CPT report noted officials from the Investigative Committee and the National Security Service reportedly used excessive force and physical mistreatment when extracting confessions or other information.

## **b. Protection of Children**

### **Child Labor**

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

## **Child Marriage**

The legal minimum age for marriage was 18, and the government generally enforced the law. Legal amendments adopted on September 11 removed the exceptions allowing for marriage at an earlier age. While early marriage of girls was reportedly widespread within Yezidi communities, there were anecdotal reports that the problem existed in ethnic Armenian families as well. Reports indicated that within the Yezidi community some girls left school either as a consequence of early marriage or to avoid abduction and forced marriage. The government did not record the number of unregistered early marriages. According to a February 2023 opinion by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, civil society organizations and Yezidi organizations asserted that while early marriage had little basis in Yezidi tradition, authorities rarely acted to prevent it due to fear of unduly restricting what they perceived to be a Yezidi tradition, leading to underreporting to police. Representatives of the Yezidi community, however, reported an incremental increase in local government officials' disapproval of the practice.

## **c. Protection to Refugees**

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

### **Provision of First Asylum**

The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a system for providing protection to refugees. The law required the detention authority to notify detainees concerning their right to apply for asylum and provided a 15-day period for application.

The law accounted for specific needs of asylum seekers who were children, persons with mental disabilities, and trauma survivors. Authorities generally enforced the law, but only to the extent scarce resources allowed. Refugees who were not ethnic Armenians could apply for facilitated naturalization, which required passing a constitutional knowledge test.

Shortcomings in state funding for interpreters and translation of documents sometimes delayed asylum processing.

While the law provided for free legal assistance to asylum seekers through the Office of the Public Defender under the Chamber of Advocates, legal, capacity, and operational constraints reportedly hindered the exercise of this right. In addition, judicial review was a lengthy process as judges remained overloaded with cases.

The law allowed detention centers to receive asylum applications. Despite a provision in the law exempting asylum seekers from criminal liability for irregular border crossing, authorities required asylum seekers to remain in detention pending the outcome of their asylum applications or to serve the remainder of their sentences.

### **Resettlement**

The government accepted refugees for resettlement and family reunification and offered naturalization to refugees residing on its territory. Integration programs for returnees from Western European countries who either voluntarily returned or were deported by the host country were available.

The government, in cooperation with UNHCR and the international donor community, continued its refugee response plan to assist the more than 115,000 displaced persons registered in Armenia from

Nagorno-Karabakh seeking housing, employment, and government services. On June 15, the government initiated a housing voucher program for displaced persons and refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh offering increased assistance ranging from two to five million drams (\$5,000-\$12,500) per person, depending on the region where recipients planned to buy or build a house or apartment. Armenian citizenship was a prerequisite for eligibility in the housing voucher program.

#### **d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement**

Observers estimated the country's Jewish population was between 800 and 1,000 persons, in addition to several hundred arrivals from Russia since the start of its war against Ukraine in 2022.

There was one violent antisemitic incident during the year. On June 11, a resident of Artashat threw a brick and broke the window of Yerevan's Mordechay Navi Synagogue. The government and the ombudsperson issued prompt statements denouncing the act. The government immediately investigated and arrested the alleged perpetrator. According to a June 19 Investigative Committee public statement, the perpetrator confessed, citing "national and ethnic enmity" as the motivating factors for the vandalism.

The government's investigation into a November 2023 vandalism act against the same synagogue, deemed a provocation by local Jewish community leaders, continued at year's end. On June 19, the Investigative Committee publicized the identity of the alleged culprit, stating he traveled to Armenia from Moscow with the specific intent to vandalize the synagogue.

For further information on incidents of antisemitism in the country, whether or not those incidents were motivated by religion, and for reporting on the ability of Jews to exercise freedom of religion or belief, see the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>.