

Document #2028276

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Human Rights in Africa: Review of 2019 - Ghana [AFR 01/1352/2020]

The Right to Information law increasing accountability was adopted. The President commuted death sentences into life imprisonment, but courts continued to hand down death sentences, and prison conditions remained deplorable. Attacks against journalists were reported; one journalist was killed and others were arbitrarily arrested. Women and girls continued to suffer discrimination and violence. LGBTI people continued to face discrimination in law and practice.

Legal, Constitutional or Institutional Developments

On 26 March, the Parliament of Ghana passed into law a bill allowing citizens access to information from all public and some private institutions in Ghana. The new Right to Information law, which took effect in 2020, is expected to increase government transparency and accountability and help combat corruption.

Freedom of expression

An increase in attacks against journalists in 2019 caused Ghana to lose its status as the best-ranked African country in Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Index.

In January, investigative journalist Ahmed Hussein-Suale was shot and killed by unidentified men on motorbikes. Suale’s work exposing corruption had incited calls to violence against him from ruling party parliamentarian Kennedy Agyapong. In television interviews, Agyapong had revealed Suale’s identity as well as information on the neighborhood in which Suale lived.

In June, the Bureau of National Investigations (BNI) arrested, detained, and allegedly tortured two journalists employed by the online news portal ModernGhana. The BNI claimed that the journalists had committed cybercrimes. Their arrests came after the publication of a ModernGhana article critical of Ghana’s National Security Minister.

Women’s rights

An Affirmative Action bill was not passed into law despite advocacy activities led by local NGOs promoting women’s rights. Women continued to be underrepresented in public and political life and at risk of gender-based violence. In October, a BBC News documentary exposing sexual harassment at the University of Ghana led to the suspension of two professors and sparked a nationwide discussion about sexual harassment in the workplace and schools.

Rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people (LGBTI)

LGBTI people continued to face discrimination and violence. Consensual same-sex relations between men remained a criminal offence. There was an increase in hate speech against LGBTI people from religious and political leaders and from the media. Plans to introduce comprehensive sex education in schools in 2020 were met with public outrage, largely due to widespread fear that the new curriculum would teach children about homosexuality.

In October, the US-based World Congress of Families sponsored a regional conference in Accra advocating for increased criminalization of LGBTI people. Several Ghanaian politicians spoke at the conference, which framed LGBTI inclusion as “anti-African”, and called for “tougher laws” against the already vulnerable group.

Detention

Prisons continued to be severely overcrowded. Prison Administration statistics as of September showed that 15,463 people (1.2% female) were being detained across 44 prisons with a combined capacity of only 2,552, and that 12.2% of detainees were held in pre-trial detention. The feeding allowance per person did not increase despite concerns about the quality and quantity of prison food. Extreme inadequacies in medical care and sanitation persisted in violation of the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Death penalty

No executions have been carried out in Ghana since 1993. Twelve people had their death sentence commuted to life imprisonment and one person was pardoned. Still, Ghana continued to sentence people to death. Eight people were sentenced because the death penalty remained mandatory for certain crimes. The government made no effort to abolish the death penalty.

Right to housing

After enduring many years of forced evictions and substandard living conditions, the residents of Agboghloshie and Old Fadama districts in Accra were assured by Vice President Dr Mahamudu Bawumia in September of the government’s plan to end evictions in those areas, which largely comprise informal settlements and provide residents with access to essential services like schools, health centres, toilets, water, roads and drainage systems. The housing policy passed in 2015 remained unimplemented.

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ecoi.net summary:

Report on the human rights situation covering 2019



Country:

Ghana

Source:

[AI – Amnesty International](#) (</en/source/10960.html>)

Original link:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/ghana/report-ghana/>
(<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/ghana/report-ghana/>)

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

8 April 2020

Document ID:

2028276

Austrian Red Cross

Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research
and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien

T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583

F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589

info@ecoi.net

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

