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Latvia

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices -2000
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Latvia is a parliamentary democracy. The Prime Minister, as chief executive, and the Cabinet are responsible for government operations. The President, as Head of State, is elected by the Parliament (Saeima). The Saeima elected Vaira Vike-Freiberga to a 4-year term in June 1999. The October 1998 elections for the 100-seat Parliament and the national referendum to amend the Citizenship Law to meet European standards were free and fair. The judiciary is independent but not well-trained, efficient, or free from corruption.

The security apparatus consists of: The national police and other services, such as the Special Immigration Police and the Border Guards, who are subordinate to the Ministry of Interior; municipal police under local government control; the military Counterintelligence Service and a protective service under the Ministry of Defense; and the National Guard, an element of the national armed forces, which also assists in police activities. Civilian authorities generally maintain effective control of the security forces. The Constitution Protection Bureau (SAB) is responsible for coordinating intelligence activities. Some members of the security forces, including police and other Interior Ministry personnel, committed human rights abuses.

Privatization essentially is complete, although some large utility companies remain in state hands including the national electric company, railroads, and shipping. The currency remained stable and traded freely; unemployment was 7.8 percent, and annual inflation was 1.8 percent. Per capita gross domestic product was approximately \$2,950.

The Government generally respected the human rights of its citizens and the large resident noncitizen community; however, problems remained in certain areas. Members of the security forces, including the police and other Interior Ministry personnel, sometimes used excessive force. In most instances, the Government took disciplinary measures against those responsible. Prison conditions remained poor. Lengthy pretrial detention was a problem. The inefficient judiciary did not always ensure the fair administration of justice. Women are discriminated against in the workplace. Domestic violence, trafficking in women (including minors), and child prostitution and abuse are significant problems.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

There were no reports of political or other extrajudicial killings.

In March 1999, a member of the security police shot and killed two persons and injured three others during a bar fight in Jelgava. In October he was sentenced to 20 years in prison; he appealed to the Supreme Court, which affirmed the verdict of the lower court.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The Constitution prohibits such practices, but there were credible reports that police and prison guards mistreated persons. In September 1999, four prison guards at Riga Central Prison were dismissed for excessive use of force against prisoners.

In conjunction with the Soros Foundation and the National Human Rights Office (NHRO), the Ministry of Interior continued its programs for educating police officers about human rights concerns. In 1999 a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) established a free legal advisory service for prisoners and others who believe that they were victims of police abuse (see Section 4).

Prison conditions remained poor, although human rights groups noted some improvements during the year. Prison cells often are overcrowded severely. Inadequate sanitation facilities, persistent shortages of blankets and medical care, and insufficient lighting and ventilation are common problems, as is the shortage of resources in general. Most jails badly need renovation. The Government has taken additional steps to upgrade certain facilities. The NHRO records complaints of violations of the right to humane treatment and respect of dignity. During the year, 47 prisoners filed complaints concerning their treatment, and 19 persons filed such complaints relating to the police. The NHRO investigates each complaint. Human rights groups are alarmed by the number of drug-resistant tuberculosis cases in the prisons, and the Government has received assistance from several foreign organizations to address this problem. Although the number of tuberculosis cases has decreased, the Riga central prison hospital remains overcrowded at close to 200 percent capacity.

At a prominent conference attended by human rights groups and government officials in November, the deputy director of the prison administration and the Prosecutor General criticized the Government for its failure to improve the Criminal Code and provide resources to the judicial system. Two youths committed suicide in July while in pretrial detention awaiting trial for murder. They were held in the same cell, one for 17 months, the other for 5 months. The archaic provisions of the Criminal Code make it difficult to investigate and move a case forward in the court system. Press reports estimate that 70 percent of all juveniles in prisons are awaiting trial. While most have been waiting for about 2 years, some have been waiting 4 years or more. Unlike convicts, those in pretrial detention are not allowed to work or go to school, have limited contact with outside NGO's or family, and suffer considerably worse living conditions than prisoners in general. The deputy director of the prison system also noted the lack of work and job training for inmates and the need to provide social support to inmates after release.

The Government permits human rights monitors to visit prisons.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The law requires the Prosecutor's Office to make a formal decision whether to charge or release a detainee within 72 hours after arrest. Charges must be filed within 10 days of arrest. There were no known instances of arbitrary arrest. The responsibility for issuing arrest warrants was transferred from prosecutors to the courts in 1994. Detainees have the right to have an attorney present at any time. These rights are subject to judicial review but only at the time of trial. According to credible reports, these rights are not always respected in practice, especially outside of Riga.

According to Ministry of Interior personnel, detainees awaiting trial spend an average of 2 years in prison, but many have been there much longer. More than 40 percent of all inmates are in pretrial detention. Complaints were filed by 94 prisoners during the year concerning their right to a just and timely trial.

The law prohibits forced exile, and there were no reports of its use.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and the Government generally respects this provision in practice. However, the courts must rely on the Ministry of Justice for administrative support, and the judiciary is not well trained, efficient, or free from corruption.

The judicial structure is composed of district (city) courts, regional courts, the Supreme Court, and the Constitutional Court. The Constitutional Court is a seven-judge panel that is authorized to hear cases regarding constitutional issues at the request of state institutions or individuals who believe that their constitutional rights were violated.

The Government continued to reform the judicial system. In 1995 it completed the establishment of regional courts to hear appeals of lower court decisions. For more serious criminal cases, two lay assessors join the professional judge on the bench. Corruption in the judicial system reportedly is widespread. In 1997 the judges appointed to preside over the trial of the president of the collapsed Bank Baltija, Aleksander Lavent, resigned from the case, citing alleged political pressure from the Government. The accusation came after the judges released Lavent to house arrest following a heart attack that he suffered in the courtroom on the first day of the trial. In December 1998, the courts determined that Lavent had recovered his health, and he was returned from house arrest to prison. The trial of Lavent and his alleged accomplices resumed briefly in the fall, but it was suspended again at year's end 1999. The trial resumed in 2000 but was suspended again due to the defendant's illness. On July 27, Lavent filed a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights accusing the Latvian courts of violating his right to a fair and speedy trial. In October Lavents led a hunger strike with several other prisoners to protest lengthy pretrial detention.

Most judges have inadequate judicial training, and the court system is too weak to enforce many of its decisions. A major difficulty in enforcing court decisions is the continuing lack of an effective bailiff or sheriff system. In 1999 a new criminal law went into force, which allows for more alternative punishments, including community service. Despite the new law, alternative punishments are utilized rarely by the courts.

Court decisions are not published systematically, nor is there a centralized index for those that are published. Trials may be closed if state secrets might be revealed or to protect the interests of minors. All defendants have the right to hire an attorney, and the State will lend funds to destitute defendants for this purpose. Defendants have the right to read all charges, confront all witnesses, and may call witnesses and offer evidence to support

their case. They also may make multiple appeals.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law requires that law enforcement authorities have a judicial warrant in order to intercept citizens' mail, telephone calls, or other forms of communication. The laws protecting privacy apply to citizens and noncitizens equally. There were no credible reports of the unsanctioned wiretapping of the telephone conversations.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The 1991 Press Law prohibits censorship of the press or other mass media. Most newspapers and magazines are privately owned. Newspapers in both Latvian and Russian publish a wide range of political criticism and viewpoints.

A large number of independent television and radio outlets broadcast in both Russian and Latvian, and the number of persons receiving satellite television broadcasts continued to increase.

The Law on the Media, revised in October 1998, contains a number of restrictive provisions regulating the content and language of broadcasts. No less than 51 percent of television broadcasts must be of European origin, of which 40 percent should be in the Latvian language. However, these provisions are not always implemented. In addition foreign investment may not exceed 20 percent of the capital in electronic media organizations.

There are no restrictions on academic freedom.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for peaceful assembly, and the authorities may not prohibit public gatherings; however, organizers of demonstrations must provide advance notice to local authorities, who may change the time and place of public gatherings for such reasons as fear of public disorder. In 1997 the Saeima passed legislation on public demonstrations that requires protesters to remain specified distances from foreign missions, the Saeima, the Prosecutor's Office, and certain other public institutions. While the law purports to imitate Western European statutes, independent human rights organizations find its provisions contradictory and confusing. Numerous demonstrations nevertheless took place peacefully and without government interference during the year.

The Constitution provides for the right of citizens to associate in public organizations; however, the Law on Registering Public Organizations bars the registration of Communist, Nazi, or other organizations whose activities would contravene the Constitution. Noncitizens can join and form political parties, but there must be at least 200 citizens in the party and at least half of the total membership must be citizens. More than 40 political parties are registered officially.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, bureaucratic problems for minority religions persist. There is no state religion, but the Government distinguishes between "traditional" (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, Baptists, and Jewish) and "new" religions.

Although the Government does not require the registration of religious groups, the 1995 Law on Religious Organizations accords religious organizations certain rights and privileges when they register, such as status as a separate legal entity for owning property or other financial transactions, as well as tax benefits for donors.

By law any 10 citizens or permanent residents over the age of 18 may apply to register a church. Congregations functioning in the country for the first time that do not belong to a church association already registered must reregister each year for 10 years. Congregations numbering 10 or more of the same denomination having permanent registration status may form a religious association. Only churches with religious association status may establish theological schools or monasteries. A decision to register a church is made by the Minister of Justice.

According to Ministry of Justice officials, most registration applications are approved eventually once proper documents are submitted. The Ministry has registered over 1,000 congregations. Problems arise and registration is denied because the Law on Religious Organizations does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious union (church) in a single confession. Because of this provision, the Government can not register any splinter groups, including an independent Jewish congregation, the Latvian Free Orthodox Church, and a separate Old Believers group. The Christian Scientists have been refused registration due to opposition from the Doctors Association.

Shortly after the renewal of independence in 1991, the Vatican, with the support of the Latvian Catholic community, requested negotiations for a reestablishment of the 1922 Concordat, which existed between Latvia and the Vatican during Latvia's period of independence between World War I and World War II. In 1996 the Prime Minister established a working group to negotiate a new agreement. This agreement reportedly would grant the Roman Catholic Church privileged status. The negotiations have led to some concern among members of other religions. If approved it is expected that adherents of other faiths would seek similar recognition and benefits for their own religious community. In November the draft agreement was submitted to the Saeima for review.

Visa regulations require that religious workers present either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a Latvian bachelor's degree in theology. The visa application process still is cumbersome. However, difficulties in this area diminished, and Citizenship and Migration Department officials have worked to ease the situation. The Government cooperated to resolve several difficult visa cases in favor of missionary workers.

Foreign evangelists and missionaries are permitted to hold meetings and to proselytize, but the law stipulates that only domestic religious organizations may invite them to conduct such activities. Foreign religious denominations have criticized this provision.

The law provides that religion may be taught to students in public schools on a voluntary basis only by representatives of Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believer, Baptist, and Jewish religions. The State provides funds for this education. Students at state-supported national minority schools also may receive education on the religion "characteristic of the national minority" on a voluntary basis. Other denominations may provide religious education in private schools only.

The Latvian Lutheran Church established its own clergy education center, the Luther Academy in Riga, in 1998. The Roman Catholic Church also has its own seminary but wants to establish its own separate faculty of theology at the University of Latvia or, alternatively, join forces with a Catholic university elsewhere in Europe that would issue degrees. The University of Latvia's theological faculty is now nondenominational.

Citizen's passports currently indicate the ethnicity of the bearer. Jews are considered an ethnic group and are listed as such rather than Latvian, Russian, etc.

Jewish community leaders have regained a number of major properties around the country, and they report that the legal framework for restitution of religious property is adequate. While restitution of a few Jewish properties proceeds, the process is slow, complex, and often delayed by legal wrangling and bureaucratic obstacles.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The Constitution provides for these rights, and the Government respects them in practice. The Government has readmitted noncitizens who claimed refugee status in a foreign country, or who voluntarily abandoned their permanent residence and then decided to return to the country to live and work. Noncitizens who left the country as refugees based on Soviet-era persecution have no difficulty returning on foreign refugee travel documents for business reasons or for family visits. The Government also extends protections to noncitizen residents who travel abroad.

The 1995 Law on the Status of Former Soviet Citizens stipulates that registered permanent resident noncitizens enjoy the right to establish and change residences, travel abroad, and return to the country. Noncitizens, as well as citizens, may be granted amnesty. However, certain rights are denied to noncitizens. They are prohibited from working as armed guards or criminal trial attorneys. Noncitizens may own land only under complex procedures but may not purchase land in the border zones. The law also provides for the issuance of a noncitizen travel document that certifies these rights.

The Government works closely with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, and the Law on Asylum Seekers and Refugees complies with all provisions of the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Special immigration police and border guards units help prescreen asylum requests. Decisions of the Citizens and Migration Affairs Office can be appealed to the Asylum Appeals Board in the Ministry of Justice.

The issue of provision of first asylum did not arise during the year and never has arisen. According to statistics provided by the immigration police, during the year 1,126 aliens were detained for questioning. Of those, 218 were deported, and 79 departed voluntarily. The Government has approached Russia and Belarus about concluding refugee readmission agreements, the lack of which poses a major barrier to effective control of the eastern border. However, by year's end agreements had not been concluded.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The Constitution provides citizens with the right to change their government peacefully, and citizens exercise this right in practice through periodic, free, and fair elections held on the basis of universal suffrage. Free and fair elections for Parliament were held in 1998, and in June 1999 the Parliament elected the President. In the 1998 election, candidates from 6 of the 21 participating parties, representing a broad political spectrum, won Saeima seats, and 72 percent of eligible voters participated.

The election law prohibits persons who remained active in the Communist Party or various other pro-Soviet organizations after January 13, 1991, or who worked for such institutions as the former Soviet Committee for State Security, from seeking elected office. Noncitizens, most of whom are ethnic Russians, are not allowed to vote; however, many ethnic Russians are Latvian citizens and can vote.

On December 15, 1999, the Supreme Court upheld a regional court decision that the extreme Russian nationalist of the Equal Rights Movement and Riga city council deputy Tatyana Zhdanok was not eligible to run for public office due to her pro-Soviet activities after January 13, 1991. After the Riga City Council annulled her election, Zhdanok filed suit against the Latvian Government in the European Court of Human Rights.

Following the restoration of independence in 1991, citizenship was accorded immediately only to those persons who were citizens of the independent Latvian Republic in 1940 and their direct descendants. After independence the status of approximately 670,000 persons, mostly ethnic Russians, changed from citizens of the Soviet Union to noncitizen residents in Latvia. Since 1995 about 39,000 persons have become citizens. Approximately 35 percent or 14,00 of these persons were naturalized in 2000 alone. Owing to the Russification policy pursued during the Soviet era, ethnic Latvians constitute only 56 percent of a total population of 2.5 million, and 78 percent of citizens. Ethnic Latvians do not constitute a majority in three of Latvia's seven cities.

The 1998 Citizenship Law includes a Latvian language and residence requirement for those seeking to naturalize, as well as restrictions on former Soviet intelligence and military personnel. The law also requires applicants for citizenship to renounce previous non-Latvian citizenship, to have knowledge of the Constitution and Latvian history, and to pledge allegiance to Latvia. At present, according to Naturalization Board figures, nearly 95 percent of applicants pass the citizenship tests on the first attempt.

In addition a 1998 referendum brought the citizenship law into compliance with Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) standards. Children of noncitizens born after August 1992 are entitled to citizenship upon application.

International observers, including the resident OSCE mission, credit the Government with establishing a competent and professional Naturalization Board with offices throughout the country to implement the law. In the estimation of the NHRO, the OSCE, and various NGO's, the Board has sought to apply the law fairly.

International experts, government officials, and domestic human rights monitors agreed that Latvia must continue to place high priority on and devote sufficient resources to implementing the citizenship law in a fair and impartial manner, as well as seek ways to expedite naturalization and promote social integration. Working with the European Union and the U.N. Development Program, the Government also has implemented a long-term nationwide Latvian language teaching program for adults and children in non-Latvian schools.

There are no ethnic restrictions on eligibility to hold political office. Nonethnic Latvians, including ethnic Russians and the first Roma deputy in the Saeima, serve in various elected bodies. Women are underrepresented in government and politics. There are 20 women in the 100-member Saeima. Two women are in the 15-member Cabinet of Ministers. For the first time, the President of the country is female.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

A growing number of NGO's devoted to research and advocacy on human rights issues, including prison conditions and women's and children's rights, operate without government restriction. Several organizations deal with issues of concern to local noncitizens and other nonethnic Latvians, presenting them to the courts and the press.

The Government engages in dialog with NGO's working on human rights issues. The NHRO is an independent governmental institution with a mandate to promote human rights, provide information on human rights, investigate individual complaints, and initiate its own investigation into alleged violations. The office acts as a general ombudsman on social issues and handles a variety of individual complaints, primarily concerning problems receiving social benefits.

A number of NGO's provide assistance to those who wish to complain of police abuse or abuse in prisons.

Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status

According to the 1922 Constitution, all citizens are equal under the law. In 1998 the Saeima passed amendments to the Constitution that granted constitutional protection to fundamental human rights. The amendments supersede provisions of the 1991 Constitutional Law, which had served in the interim, and contain constitutional provisions for the exercise of the freedoms of speech, religion, association, the press, and other basic liberties. The amendments also provide for protection from discrimination due to race, sex, religion, language, or disability. Only citizens can vote or hold government office. There are some restrictions on land purchases by noncitizens.

Women

Despite legal protections, international observers and human rights groups increasingly are concerned about problems facing women. Although no overall statistics are available, sources indicate that domestic violence against women, often connected with alcohol abuse, is significant and underreported. Women who are victims of abuse often seem to be uninformed about their rights and reluctant to seek redress through the justice system. Human rights groups assert that the legal system, including the courts, tends to downplay the seriousness of domestic violence and that the police are sometimes reluctant to make arrests in such cases.

There are no shelters designed specifically for battered or abused women. There is one shelter in Riga where homeless women with children may reside for up to 2 months. Likewise, there are no specific rape or assault hot lines; however, two crisis hot lines are managed by NGO's.

Police do not compile figures for domestic violence as a distinct category. Instead, episodes are placed under more general categories such as assault or battery. During the year, 107 rape cases were reported.

Both adult and child prostitution are widespread, often linked to organized crime, and abetted by economic problems (see Section 6.f.). The Government estimates that 3,000 persons work as prostitutes. The NHRO reports that adult prostitutes have no legal protections. Prostitution is legal; procuring is not. There are no state institutions to assist prostitutes. However, the private Latvian Center for Gender Problems provides medical help and social support for prostitutes.

Sexual harassment of women in the workplace, although illegal, is reportedly common. Cultural factors tend to discourage women from coming forth publicly with complaints of abuse.

Women possess the same legal rights as men. The Labor Code prohibits women from performing "hard jobs or jobs having unhealthy conditions," which are specified in a list agreed upon by the Cabinet and labor unions. The code also bans employment discrimination. In reality women frequently face hiring and pay discrimination, especially in the emerging private sector. According to the Central Statistics Bureau, the number of women in the lower income brackets exceeds that of men by 75 percent, while men outnumber women two to one in upper income levels. The Ministry of Welfare has designated a one-person office with responsibility for gender issues.

Women's advocacy groups are growing in size and number. They are involved in finding employment for women, lobbying for increased social benefits, and assisting victims of domestic abuse.

Children

The law on the rights of the child and the constitutional provisions on children are based on Western European models and provide for various protections, including health care and legal protections against physical abuse. However, resources are not adequate to ensure observance of these provisions. There is a national center for the protection of the rights of the child.

Evidence suggests that abandonment and child abuse, including sexual abuse, are relatively widespread, as is child prostitution. An estimated 12 to 15 percent of prostitutes are considered juveniles, that is, between the ages of 8 and 18. Although in theory the Constitution and the Law on the Rights of the Child protect children, these rights only are enforced sporadically in the case of child prostitutes. Schooling is mandatory through the ninth grade, between the ages of 7 and 16, and free through the 12th grade, or age 18. Despite the existence of laws on mandatory education, truancy is widespread and growing. A few children's advocacy groups are active, particularly in lobbying for legislation to protect children's rights and for increased welfare payments for children.

Law enforcement authorities have won court suits to remove children from abusive parents and secured convictions in child molestation cases.

Trafficking in young girls for forced prostitution abroad is increasing (see Sections 6.c. and 6.f.).

People with Disabilities

The Constitution calls for protection of the disabled against discrimination; the 1992 Law on the Medical and Social Protection of Disabled provides for their right of access to public facilities. Provisions in the Labor Law and other laws aim to protect the disabled from bias in the workplace and from job discrimination. In 1998 the Cabinet adopted a framework document entitled "Equal Opportunity for Everyone." The document is designed to coordinate the efforts of all branches of Government in assisting the disabled. The Government supports special schools for disabled persons. It does not enforce uniformly a 1993 law requiring buildings to be accessible to wheelchairs, and most buildings are not. However, some larger cities, including Riga and Ventspils, have undertaken an extensive wheelchair ramp building program at intersections.

Religious Minorities

In August the magazine *Kapitals* published a derogatory article about Jews and business. The public and senior government officials immediately condemned the article. The editor of the magazine resigned, and senior officials of the company apologized.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Of the country's more than 2.4 million inhabitants, approximately 1 million persons are of non-Latvian ethnicity, including more than 700,000 ethnic Russians, 100,000 ethnic Belarusians, almost 64,000 ethnic Ukrainians, and more than 60,000 ethnic Poles. More than 74 percent of the country's inhabitants are citizens, including nearly 400,000 persons who belong to national or ethnic minorities. There are approximately 583,000 resident noncitizens, of whom an estimated 68 percent are Russian; 12 percent, Belarusian; 9 percent, Ukrainian; and smaller percentages of Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Roma, Germans, Tatars, Estonians, and Armenians.

Ethnicity is identified in the passport of Latvian citizens but not in the passports of Latvia's noncitizen residents. Groups such as Roma and Belarusians have complained that, because the passport is a basic form of identification, this requirement has opened them to various forms of discrimination based on ethnicity.

On December 9, 1999, the Saeima passed a revised version of the language law, which went into effect on September 1, 2000. The language law regulates the uses of language that affect public safety, health care, protection of the consumer, and labor rights. The law requires that documents submitted to the Government be translated into Latvian, including company reports and records, except in cases of emergency. If a public event is coorganized by the State, one of the working languages must be Latvian. Labels and user instructions for goods sold must be in Latvian, although other languages can be present as well. The law and its implementing regulations meet international standards. However, the implementation of this law remains a matter of public debate and continued international attention.

In July 1998, the police arrested Vilis Linins, the chief ideologue of the ultranationalist Thundercross organization, which was suspected of terrorist attacks against Soviet memorials and other targets. On May 29, 2000, Linins was found guilty of several acts of vandalism and sentenced to 3 years' imprisonment and fined \$35,000 (21,000 lats). This was the first case where a political group was convicted of violent acts carried out to promote its political goals.

The Government financially supports education in both Latvian and Russian, as well as in eight other minority languages. However, under the revised Education Law, the Government is implementing a bilingual education program at the elementary school level. The goal of this program is to facilitate the eventual transition to Latvian-language secondary schools by 2004. Although all non-Latvian-speaking students in public schools are supposed to learn Latvian and to study a minimum number of subjects in Latvian, there is a shortage of qualified teachers.

State-funded university education is in Latvian, and incoming students whose native language is not Latvian must pass a language entrance examination. However, several private institutions offer higher education in Russian.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The Law on Trade Unions stipulates that workers, except for the uniformed military, have the right to form and join labor unions of their own choosing. Union membership is about 30 percent of the work force. Free elections for union leadership are held every 4 years.

The law does not limit the right to strike, but there were no major strikes during the year. The law bans the dismissal of employees who have invoked the right to strike. No cases of such dismissals have been reported.

Unions are free to affiliate internationally and have established contacts with European labor unions and international labor union organizations.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

Labor unions have the right to bargain collectively and are largely free of government interference in their negotiations with employers. The law prohibits discrimination against union members and organizers. The Government's ability to protect the right to organize in the private sector is weak.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, including by children, and it generally is not practiced. Inspectors from the Ministry of Welfare's State Labor Inspection Board or Inspectorate enforce this ban. However, trafficking in women (including minors) for prostitution abroad is a significant problem (see Section 6.f.).

d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for Employment

The statutory minimum age for employment of children is 15 years, although children between the ages of 13

and 15 years may work in certain jobs outside of school hours. The law restricts employment of those under the age of 18; for example, by banning night shift or overtime work. Schooling is compulsory until age 16 and free until age 18. State authorities are lax in their enforcement of child labor and school attendance laws. There generally is no evidence of forced or bonded labor involving children, which is prohibited by law (see Section 6.c.); however, trafficking in young girls for prostitution is a problem (see Section 6.f.).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The monthly minimum wage is about \$82 (50 lats), far below the amount that trade union officials describe as the bare minimum for survival.

The Labor Code provides for a mandatory 40-hour maximum workweek with at least one 42-hour rest period weekly, 4 weeks of annual vacation, and a program of assistance to working mothers with small children. The laws establish minimum occupational health and safety standards for the workplace, but these standards frequently are ignored. Workers have the legal right to remove themselves from hazardous work situations without endangering their continued employment, but these standards also frequently are ignored in practice.

f. Trafficking in Persons

In May the Criminal Code was revised to make it illegal to forcibly send a person to a foreign country for the purpose of sexual exploitation. There were no prosecutions by year's end.

There were instances of trafficking in women for purposes of forced prostitution. Prostitution is a significant problem in Riga, and there is evidence that trafficking in women (including minors) for prostitution abroad also is increasing. The country is primarily a source or transit country rather than a destination.

[End.]

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