



# Human Rights & Democracy

## The 2017 Foreign & Commonwealth Office Report

Presented to Parliament

by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

by Command of Her Majesty

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Following the election, the Constituent Assembly took on a supra-constitutional authority, taking away legislative capacity from the National Assembly. It replaced the Prosecutor General who had spoken against the government during the protests, and ordered the electoral authorities to call for overdue gubernatorial and municipal elections before the end of the year.

Despite having no constitutional powers to write laws, on 8 November, the Constituent Assembly passed a Law against Hatred, which imposed further restrictions on media outlets and political parties. The Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Edison Lanza, said that the law would fuel repression and self-censorship. The NGO Freedom House ranked the internet in Venezuela as “not free”. The Venezuelan press workers’ union reported a total of 498 violations to freedom of expression during 2017, an increase of 26.5% compared with 2016. Venezuela continues to lack legislation and policies to protect LGBT communities, and impunity for hate crime is high.

In November, the EU Foreign Affairs Council unanimously adopted a sanctions regime on Venezuela. The EU expressed its concerns about the lack of respect for and erosion of democratically elected institutions, violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the urgent needs of the population that affected their rights such as the right to food and to health.

The UK maintained dialogue on human rights with diverse actors. In May, the then Minister for Human Rights, Baroness Anelay of St Johns, visited Caracas and held meetings with senior government representatives, including the then Foreign Minister, Delcy Rodríguez, in which she encouraged respect for civil and political rights for all Venezuelans, including the holding of free and fair elections. She also met the National Assembly’s Board, as well as representatives of civil society organisations and high-profile human rights defenders. In March and November, we organised two major events: Women of the

Future, Venezuela, and the inaugural meeting of the Business Forum of the Venezuelan Alliance for Women’s corporate leadership.

The deteriorating humanitarian situation is likely to have increased Venezuelans’ vulnerability to modern slavery, particularly to neighbouring countries (including islands in the Caribbean). These practices include sex trafficking (especially of women, girls and LGBT), domestic servitude and forced labour.

In 2018, the UK will continue to focus on concerns over the erosion of political freedoms and the adverse impact of the social and economic crisis, including modern slavery, girls’ access to education and women’s rights, with a special focus on eliminating violence against women and girls.

## Yemen

The human rights situation worsened in Yemen in 2017. The conflict undermined the rule of law, leaving few mechanisms to protect human rights. The main issues were women’s rights including girls’ education, the recruitment of child soldiers, arbitrary detention, and attacks on freedom of religion or belief and on freedom of speech and association. The de facto Houthi authorities in northern Yemen, the Government of Yemen and a number of non-state militias across the country allegedly committed a wide range of human rights violations and abuses. The UN reported that 13,520 civilians had been killed or injured since April 2015, and that over two million people had been displaced.

The right to freedom of religion or belief was denied in several areas. Members of the Baha’i faith faced persecution, including arrest and imprisonment. The UN Human Rights Council resolution on Yemen in September called for the immediate release of all Baha’i detainees. There were credible reports alleging that the de facto Houthi authorities in northern Yemen had tortured Baha’i detainees. In the liberated areas of southern Yemen, there were reports that three teenagers in Aden accused of atheism had been murdered. The UK lobbied for the release of Baha’i detainees and raised

the importance of freedom of religion or belief both publicly and in our engagement with parties to the conflict.

UN and NGO reports highlighted the continued recruitment of child soldiers by all parties in Yemen. Economic deprivation and the breakdown of the education system rendered young males especially vulnerable. There were anecdotal reports of families sending their children to fight in order to generate much-needed income. The UNICEF Resident Representative said that the organisation had verified 2,369 cases of child recruitment between March 2015 and January 2018 in Yemen.

Yemen was last among the countries cited in the 2017 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap report. The breakdown of the rule of law meant that there was limited recourse for victims of gender-based violence or abuse. A 2017 UN report highlighted child marriage as a particular concern, estimating that 52% of women marry before the age of 18, and 14% before the age of 15. The report said that the desperate need of many families for income had exacerbated the problem. Through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), we supported UN Women to increase Yemeni women’s capacity to influence political and conflict actors and their inclusion in the peace process, political dialogue and local peacebuilding initiatives.

Arbitrary disappearances and the use of torture were common across Yemen. In northern Yemen, there were regular credible reports of kidnapping being used as a political tool. In December, the Houthis reportedly imprisoned hundreds of General People’s Congress members without proper judicial process. In the liberated areas, there were credible reports from the Associated Press and from Human Rights Watch of the use of secret prisons. There is no reliable process for inquiry into detainees held at these facilities.

Freedom of speech was curtailed across the country. There were reports that the Houthis arrested dozens of journalists in Sana’a. There were also reports of beatings and killings. Yahya Al Jubeiha, a journalist, was sentenced

to death in April in Sana'a. Human rights defenders were also under threat. The Houthis arbitrarily detained prominent activist Hisham Al Omeisy in Sana'a for five months with no access to a lawyer or to his family. The UK spoke out publicly about the need to respect journalists and freedom of expression.

The death penalty is used in Yemen. In August, there was a credible report of a public execution in Sana'a for an alleged violent crime. Consensual sexual relations between people of the same gender remain illegal in Yemen and are subject under the law to the death penalty in some cases.

As part of our commitment to improving the overall human rights situation in Yemen, the UK negotiated and agreed the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) resolution which was adopted in September. The resolution mandated the creation of a panel of experts to conduct an independent investigation into the human rights situation in Yemen.

In 2018, the UK will continue to lead international efforts to end the conflict and restore the legitimate Government of Yemen. A stable political settlement is the only way to provide the conditions necessary to improve the human rights situation. While the conflict continues, we will continue to urge all parties to protect civilians and respect international human rights and humanitarian law. The UK will work with the UN OHCHR to increase the capacity of Yemeni bodies to investigate and to prevent human rights violations and abuses.

DFID provided £112 million in aid to Yemen for 2016/17, including programmes supporting internally displaced persons, education and the protection of civilians. The UK provided £205 million in aid to Yemen for 2017/18, making us the second-largest donor to the UN Humanitarian Appeal for Yemen and the third-largest humanitarian donor to Yemen overall. In 2018, we will continue to use the CSSF to support additional activity to increase the role of women in local governance and peacebuilding.

## Zimbabwe

In 2017, the human rights situation in Zimbabwe remained serious. The human rights monitoring group Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP) recorded 1,852 human rights violations, 20% fewer than in 2016. This continues a long-term trend of slow improvement since the extensive government-sponsored political violence in 2008. Incidents included politically motivated intimidation, discrimination, harassment and assault, violent policing, arbitrary arrests and torture. Following a military intervention, Emmerson Mnangagwa was sworn in as president on 24 November, marking the end of Robert Mugabe's 37 years in power.

Politically motivated intimidation occurred throughout 2017. The National Constitutional Assembly alleged that ZANU-PF members assaulted its candidate and agent in a by-election in Bikita West in January. In October, ZANU-PF supporters reportedly assaulted supporters of the Movement for Democratic Change – Tsvangirai (MDC-T) mobilising voter registration in Chitungwiza. Factional disputes within ZANU-PF resulted in intra-party intimidation and violence. There were incidents of violence along ethnic lines in the MDC-T also, as rivals clashed over alliance building with other parties.

The authorities continued to use the distribution of food aid for political ends, including after the inauguration of President Mnangagwa. In May, the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission deployed teams to Gutu, Zaka and Bikita West to investigate alleged cases.

The authorities imposed more stringent conditions on opposition demonstrators than on supporters of the ruling ZANU-PF party. Several planned opposition demonstrations were banned, and at least two opposition political meetings were interrupted by Zimbabwe Republic Police.

The state continued to limit freedom of expression. The authorities responded to perceived criticism of former President Mugabe by arresting two journalists and several activists and charging them with insulting the office of the president.

The ongoing economic crisis left citizens without access to cash as banks struggled to honour deposits. Anecdotal evidence indicated that children in low income areas were increasingly vulnerable to sexual exploitation because of the economic situation. Child rights groups reported that girls aged between 12 and 17 had been engaging in prostitution along major highways and in some poor neighbourhoods of Harare. Despite a ban in 2015, child marriage remained common. In June alone, 40 cases were reported in Mbire District. Gender-based violence was also a common problem. There is near gender parity of schooling until secondary level where there are 5 boys for every 4 girls. Pregnancy and/or early marriage account for 18% of total female drop-outs and financial pressure accounts for a further 46%. In response, the UK supported Camfed's Zimbabwe Girls' Secondary Education project which provided 40,374 girls with bursaries and complementary support.

Periodically, small-scale urban street traders had their wares confiscated and destroyed by the local authorities with the assistance of government security forces. Many local authorities failed to provide basic services, including safe drinking water and sanitation. There were multiple reported incidents of road traffic accidents caused by aggressive use by the police of metal spikes to stop vehicles in order to extort money. However, police roadblocks largely disappeared following the military intervention in November.

LGBT people faced discrimination, family disownment, displacement from lodgings, unfair labour practices, arrest and harassment by police, blackmail and bullying on social media. A court sentenced one LGBT person to 18 months in jail for "inappropriate conduct".

The state continued to fail to enforce property rights effectively, and court orders were frequently ignored. The farms owned by the Connolly and Rankin families remained occupied in violation of court orders. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission is investigating allegations of human rights violations by government officials