

continued to drive high rates of domestic violence and suicide amongst women. A high-profile sexual assault case involving a university student drew widespread condemnation, and law enforcement responded quickly. Uzbekistan developed a National Action Plan at the end of 2021. However, legal protection needed further improvement, including criminalising rape within marriage. According to official data, over 100 women face violence and harassment on average per day. Less than 20% of aggressors are involved in remedial programmes, and only 0.2% are prosecuted. The UK held a Gender Equality Week in Uzbekistan, highlighting the high rates of domestic violence and suicide amongst women in the country.

Media freedom worsened, with certain websites and social media outlets blocked, and journalists pressured into self-censorship or refused accreditation. One prominent foreign journalist was stripped of accreditation and forcibly removed from the country. The year saw an increase in criminal investigations and prosecutions of critical, independent voices. In July, access to TikTok, Twitter, VKontakte, WeChat and Skype messenger was blocked. In November, more social media platforms were temporarily blocked, notably YouTube and Telegram.

Despite being named a priority for Uzbekistan in President Mirziyoyev's inauguration speech in December, civil society support remains limited. The registration process for independent NGOs is opaque and arbitrarily restrictive – some were rejected repeatedly for minor grammatical errors in documentation.

LGBT+ rights remained non-existent. The proposed public consultation on decriminalising same-sex relations between men did not take place. One incident involved a violent physical attack and inflammatory online commentary against a blogger in April, with no subsequent legal action except against the victim. One Presidential candidate called for special “cure” medical treatment, as well as removal of citizenship and

deportation of homosexual citizens. Anecdotally, police continued to employ physical and psychological intimidation – including threats of outing and blackmail. There were reports of forced anal examinations of suspects, with results used as a basis for court decisions, and “correctional rape” against both men and women.

The government remained engaged on freedom of religion or belief, particularly with UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Human Rights in Counter Terrorism. Relaxation of rules on wearing religious clothing led to an increase in practising Muslims outwardly expressing their religion. However, there were two media reports of practising Muslim men being forced to shave by local law enforcement. A new law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations” entered into force in July but failed to take into account a number of important recommendations by the Venice Commission. The definition of terrorism-related offences in domestic law remains imprecise, leading to concerns about discrimination against religious minorities.

Positively, President Mirziyoyev announced in February that Uzbekistan would ratify the Optional Protocol of the 1984 UN Convention Against Torture. A Parliamentary Committee was set up to oversee the implementation of this and other human rights conventions. However, there remained no accountability for pre-2016 torture practices and other human rights violations, undermining confidence in the justice system. Many torture victims remained incarcerated for national security offences. Prison conditions saw improvements, with good practice on family access, medical and psychological services. Complaint boxes were installed, under the supervision of the Ombudsman. More action was needed to improve conditions: many prisons still have inadequate facilities, poor sanitation and food quality, with prisoners

experiencing ill-treatment and endemic health issues.

The UK encourages Uzbekistan to take an active role in the UN Human Rights Council (HRC). The British Embassy will work with the Ombudsman and prison authorities on penal reform; and continue its five-year project ‘Effective Governance for Economic Development’, supporting the Uzbek government to develop evidence-based policy formulation, implementation, and communication.

Venezuela

Venezuela's human rights and humanitarian crises worsened, with civil society actors continuing to operate in a very challenging environment. The International Criminal Court (ICC) opened an investigation into crimes against humanity. The United Nations' International Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela (IIFFM) report detailed a politically controlled judicial system. Access to basic public services and food remained severely limited for many citizens. The authorities continue to deprioritise women's and LGBT+ issues. There was evidence of significant electoral irregularities in regional elections held in November.

During his mission to Caracas in November, the ICC Prosecutor, Karim Khan, announced the commencement of an investigation backed by a commitment from local authorities to cooperate. The decision to initiate the first ICC investigation in the Americas is the result of the Prosecutor finding reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity had been committed and that the national judicial system had failed to investigate them adequately. Judicial reform was under discussion in the Mexico negotiations between the Maduro regime and the opposition before dialogue was suspended by the regime. The regime announced a number of laws to reform the judiciary in September and December; it remains

to be seen whether these will address core concerns.

The UN's IFFM identified that the justice system played a significant role in the State's repression of people perceived as opponents.^[167] In May, authorities seized the headquarters of newspaper El Nacional, after the Supreme Court ordered it to pay an exorbitant sum for alleged defamation of National Assembly member Diosdado Cabello. National Assembly members were banned from leaving the country and 28 were disqualified from holding political office. Opposition leader Freddy Guevara spent a month detained before being released to participate in the talks in Mexico in August. Imprisonment conditions remain a concern – three political prisoners, including a former minister, died in custody.

Reported attacks against human rights defenders increased 145% compared with 2020.^[168] In January, State intelligence officials detained five men from the public health NGO Azul Positivo; they were conditionally released a month later. In July, members of human rights NGO FundaRedes were detained after identifying links between Venezuelan authorities and armed groups in border state Apure. Two were released in October, but the Director remains imprisoned and in a precarious health situation. An administrative ruling with new measures to restrict international funding of NGOs came into effect in May. Through capacity building programme work, the UK provided support to Venezuelan civil society actors and has created safe spaces to share information regarding human rights violations.

The number of fatal security operations conducted by the authorities remained high and the majority followed patterns of previous extrajudicial killings. National Police Special Forces killed at least 14 young men in an operation in Caracas in January, and detained

and subsequently killed five people in Apure in March. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) cited some progress in enquires by the courts into cases of extrajudicial executions.

Difficulty accessing water, gas and petrol remained a concern, especially outside Caracas. After years of negotiations, the World Food Programmes (WFP) was granted approval to launch a school feeding programme, a milestone in responding to Venezuela's food insecurity crisis. The number of Venezuelans who have fled the country reached 6 million. The UK is a donor to the Humanitarian Response Plan for Venezuela and remained engaged in efforts to ensure access to vaccines, including by donating £250,000 to UNOCHA's Venezuelan Humanitarian Fund.

In February, Nicolas Maduro said LGBT+ rights were not a priority in his agenda and maintained the ban on same sex relationships within the military after reforming the Military Code. Venezuela lags behind other countries in the region on women's rights issues, such as the decriminalisation of abortion, which did not feature on public policy agendas. A UK-funded programme began in November to teach 350 girls outside the school system, and their guardians, about sexual health education and menstrual hygiene.

Regional elections took place in November. Observers identified some improvements in electoral conditions and structures, such as the newly appointed board of directors of the National Electoral Council with two opposition members, but there were serious shortcomings in the electoral process and evidence of significant electoral irregularities. Prior to the election, the UK provided capacity building for civil society organisations and journalists on conditions for free elections.

The UK will continue to prioritise LGBT+, girls' and women's rights.

The UK will continue to support civil society actors in Venezuela through capacity building and by calling out violations of human rights. The UK will continue working with UN agencies to support the implementation of the Humanitarian Response Plan.

Yemen

The human rights situation in Yemen did not improve during 2021 and we remain concerned about worsening conditions in 2022. Human rights violations and abuses by all sides were reported, including attacks on women's rights, social and economic rights, humanitarian access, freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. There were reports of continued recruitment of child soldiers, ongoing arbitrary detentions, torture and sexual violence.

The mandate of the UN Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen was not renewed in 2021. The Group's crucial role provided ongoing reporting on the conflict. The UK supported the Group's mandate renewal and urged the parties to investigate allegations and take action to promote and protect human rights. The UK continued to support the UN Special Envoy for Yemen and encouraged all parties to find a political solution to the conflict, to protect human rights and address the humanitarian crisis.

Increased hostilities during 2021 contributed to the deterioration in the human rights and humanitarian situation, notably the Houthi offensive on Marib. There were weekly Houthi attacks using short-range missiles. In October, the UK supported a UN Security Council (UNSC) press statement condemning Houthi attacks, in particular the 8 October attack on King Abdullah Airport and the drone attacks striking the Abha civilian airport. The Houthis obstructed humanitarian assistance, including by detaining UN staff and

[167] <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session48/Documents/A-HRC-48-69-EN.docx>

[168] Information provided by local NGO Centre for Human Rights Defenders and Justice. The report is not public yet but it will be available at <https://centrodefensores.org.ve/#:~:text=El%20Centro%20para%20los%20Defensores,en%20Venezuela%20conforme%20a%20las>