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Latvia

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2001
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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. The Parliament 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 Government generally respects the constitutional provision for an independent judiciary in practice; however, the judiciary is 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 who are under local government control, the military Counterintelligence Service and a protective service which are 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 is responsible for coordinating intelligence activities. Members of the security forces, including police and other Interior Ministry personnel, committed human rights abuses.

The country has a population of approximately 2.5 million. 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 was traded freely; unemployment was 7.7 percent, and annual inflation was 3 percent. Per capita gross domestic product was approximately \$3,013.

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 and mistreated persons. 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. Violence against women, including domestic violence, was a problem, and women were discriminated against in the workplace. There were some reports of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. Child prostitution and abuse were problems. Trafficking in women and girls for the purpose of prostitution was a problem.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports of the arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life committed by the Government or its agents.

On April 26, a conscript in the Army's Special Operations Unit died as a result of hazing by other conscripts. On May 11, the Prosecutor's Office charged 12 soldiers with hazing a total of 28 victims. The unit's commander subsequently was discharged; the cases were ongoing at year's end. In May the Ministry of Defense initiated a program to eliminate hazing. The Ministry also accelerated the establishment of a military ombudsman program to review conscript complaints.

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; however, there were credible reports that members of the security forces used excessive force and mistreated persons. In November the Council of Europe (COE) issued a report of its visit to detention facilities in 1999. According to the COE report, three cases of severe abuse



occurred. All involved local police officials. The Government denied strongly the COE's allegations.

The Government has taken action against those responsible for the abuse of prisoners. In February 2000, the Prosecutor's office announced that it had initiated disciplinary cases against 30 law enforcement personnel for various violations and that 12 had been punished, including 2 who were dismissed and 2 who were demoted.

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. These programs form part of the basic curriculum for all police officers. In addition a continuing education program required for midlevel officers focuses on the use of force, firearms, and dealing with victims. The SOROS program emphasizes a "train the trainers" approach and has trained seven teaching staff. SOROS provided funding during the year to introduce a module on community policing. 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 some progress was made in renovating old and unsafe prison facilities, and the outdated Doebele Detention Facility was closed in March. Overcrowding remained a problem, particularly in those facilities that house prisoners awaiting trial, which were at 110 percent of capacity. In May the Government enacted "temporary regulations" designed to ease the conditions for those held in such detention facilities, including restrictions on the number of occupants per cell and the continuation of the physical rehabilitation of older prisons. According to government figures, regular prisons were filled to 85 percent of overall capacity. Despite efforts by the Central Prison Administration, inadequate sanitation facilities, a persistent shortage of medical care, and insufficient lighting and ventilation were common problems; all stem from a lack of resources. Prisoners launched a series of hunger strikes in April and May to protest new regulations prohibiting the delivery of outside foods parcels to both detainees and prisoners in remand facilities. These strikes ended peacefully on May 31. The NHRO records and investigates complaints of violations of the right to humane treatment and respect of dignity. During the year, 33 prisoners filed complaints against the police. The Government, as well as human rights groups, remained concerned regarding the high number of drug-resistant tuberculosis cases (there were 37 drug-resistant tuberculosis cases in the Riga Central Prison Hospital at year's end), and the Government has received assistance from several foreign organizations to address this problem. Although the number of cases continued to decrease, the Riga Central Prison Hospital remained overcrowded at more than 150 percent of capacity.

Despite its stated intentions, the Government moved very slowly with its efforts to improve the criminal code and provide additional resources to the prison system. The situation of juveniles being held for lengthy periods of pretrial detention was a problem (see Section 1.d.). In April the President visited the Brasas Detention Facility and publicly criticized the conditions under which the juveniles were being incarcerated and the length of their pretrial confinement. Juveniles are held separately from adults. Overall 40 percent of all prisoners in the country were awaiting trial at year's end (see Section 1.d.). Unlike convicted criminals, persons in pretrial detention are not allowed to work or go to school, have limited contact with outside NGO's or family, and suffer from considerably worse living conditions than prisoners in general. Pretrial detainees are held separately from convicted criminals, and female prisoners are held separately from male prisoners.

The Government permits independent human rights monitors to visit prisons. Domestic groups, such as the Latvian Center for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies, closely monitored prison conditions during the year.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The Constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention; however, at times the Government did not respect these prohibitions in practice. 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. The courts have responsibility for issuing arrest warrants. 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 in practice pretrial detention can last much longer. More than 40 percent of all inmates are in pretrial detention. By year's end, 62 percent of all juveniles in custody were awaiting trial (down from 70 percent last year). According to a human rights NGO, of the 192 minors held in pretrial detention in Brasas, 36 had been held for less than 6 months, 68 from 6 months to 1 year, 57 from 1 to 2 years, and 31 for more than 2 years. During 2000 94 prisoners filed complaints concerning their right to a fair and timely trial (see Section 1.e.).

The law prohibits forced exile, and there were no reports that the Government employed it.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and the Government generally respected this provision in practice; however, the courts must rely on the Ministry of Justice for administrative support, and the judiciary is poorly trained, inefficient, and corrupt.

The judicial structure is composed of district (city) courts, regional courts, which hear appeals from district courts, the Supreme Court, which is the highest appeals 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. For more serious criminal cases, two lay assessors join the professional judge on the bench at the district and

citizens (see Section 3). 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 persisted. There is no state religion; however, the Government distinguishes between "traditional" (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, Baptist, and Jewish) and "new" religions.

Although the Government does not require the registration of religious groups, the law accords religious organizations certain rights and privileges when they register, such as status as a separate legal entity for owning property or for other financial transactions, as well as tax benefits for donors. Registration also eases the rule for public gatherings. 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. Ten or more congregations 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; however, the law does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious union (church) in a single confession and the Government has denied applications on this basis. The Ministry has registered over 1,000 congregations; however, because of this provision, the Government cannot register any splinter groups, including an independent Jewish congregation, the Latvian Free Orthodox Church, and a separate Old Believers group.

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 has 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 the Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, 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.

Property restitution has been substantially completed. The status of the remaining properties is unclear and is the subject of complicated legal and internal bureaucratic strife.

Citizens' passports indicate the ethnicity of the bearer. Jews are considered an ethnic group and are listed as such rather than as Latvian, Russian, or other.

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

The Constitution provides for these rights, and the Government generally respects them in practice.

The law stipulates that registered permanent resident noncitizens enjoy the right to establish and change residences, travel abroad, and return to the country; however, certain rights are denied to noncitizen residents (see Section 3). 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 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 during the Soviet era 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 law provides for the granting of refugee and asylum status in accordance with the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. The Government cooperates with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees. Special immigration police and border guard units help prescreen asylum requests. Decisions of the Citizens and Migration Affairs Office may 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. According to statistics provided by the immigration police, 655 aliens were detained for questioning during the year. Of those 148 were deported, and 131 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, these agreements had not yet been concluded.

regional levels.

The Government continued to reform the judicial system; however, 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 trial of Lavent and his alleged accomplices resumed briefly in 1999 and again in 2000, but was suspended due to the defendant's illness. In July 2000, 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 2000, Lavent led a hunger strike with several other prisoners to protest lengthy pretrial detention. Further attempts to proceed with Lavent's case were unsuccessful due to his continuing claims of illness. The European Court of Human Rights did not hear the case by year's end.

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. The law allows for more alternative punishments, including community service; however, alternative punishments rarely are used by the courts.

Lengthy pretrial detention is a problem (see Section 1.d.). The NHRO reviewed 102 cases during the year regarding prisoner's rights; the majority concerned their right to a fair and timely trial. By year's end, a domestic human rights NGO recorded four complaints regarding the right to a fair and public trial within a reasonable time. An aging and time consuming judicial process, the lack of plea-bargaining, and a shortage of judges have overloaded the courts to the point where the average case takes 2 years to reach judicial review.

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 indigent 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 prohibits such actions, and the Government generally respects these prohibitions in practice. 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 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 these rights in practice. The Press Law prohibits censorship of the press or other mass media; however, the Law on the Media contains a number of restrictive provisions regulating the content and language of broadcasts. At least 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.

Both Latvian and Russian language newspapers publish a wide range of political criticism and viewpoints. Most newspapers and magazines are owned privately. 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 Government generally does not restrict access to the Internet.

The Government generally respects academic freedom.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for freedom of 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. The law also requires protesters to remain specified distances from foreign diplomatic missions, the Parliament, the Prosecutor's Office, and certain other public institutions. Independent human rights organizations argue that the law's provisions are contradictory and confusing. Nevertheless, numerous demonstrations took place peacefully and without government interference during the year.

The Constitution provides for freedom of association, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; 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

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; candidates from 6 of the 21 participating parties, representing a broad political spectrum, won seats in Parliament, and 72 percent of eligible voters participated. In June 1999, the Parliament elected the President.

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 (see Section 5). 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 (see Section 2.b.).

In December 1999, the Supreme Court upheld a regional court decision that Tatyana Zhdanok, an extreme Russian nationalist of the Equal Rights Movement and a Riga city council deputy, was not eligible to run for public office due to her pro-Soviet activities after January 13, 1991. In June 2000, after the Riga City Council formally annulled her election, Zhdanok sued the Government for \$50,000 in the European Court for Civil Rights. The case had not been heard by year's end.

The percentages of women or minorities in government and politics does not correspond to their percentages in the population. There are 20 women in the 100-member Parliament. Two women are in the 15-member Cabinet of Ministers. For the first time, the President of the country is a woman. There are no ethnic restrictions on eligibility to hold political office. Nonethnic Latvians, including ethnic Russians and the first Roma deputy in the Parliament, serve in various elected bodies.

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

There are a growing number of domestic and international NGO's devoted to research and advocacy on human rights issues, including prison conditions and women's and children's rights, which generally operate without government restriction. Several organizations deal with issues of concern to local noncitizens and other nonethnic Latvians and present such concerns to the courts and the press. The Government engages in dialog with NGO's working on human rights issues and is generally responsive to their views. A number of NGO's provide assistance to those who wish to complain about police abuse or abuse in prisons (see Section 1.c.).

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 investigations into alleged violations. The office acts as a general ombudsman on social issues and handles a variety of individual complaints, primarily concerning problems with receiving social benefits.

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

According to the Constitution, all citizens are equal under the law. Amendments to the Constitution passed by Parliament in 1998 provide for the protection from discrimination due to race, sex, religion, language, or disability; however, discrimination against women in the workplace is a problem.

Women

Although no overall statistics are available, observers report that domestic violence against women, often connected with alcohol abuse, is significant and underreported. 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, 112 rape cases were reported. Women who are victims of abuse often are uninformed about their rights and are 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 reluctant at times 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. There are no specific rape or assault hot lines; however, two crisis hot lines are managed by NGO's.

Prostitution is widespread and often is linked to organized crime. The Government has estimated that 3,000 persons work as prostitutes. Prostitution is legal; however, procuring is not, but the NHRO reports that adult prostitutes have no legal protections. There are no state institutions to assist prostitutes; however, the private Latvian Center for Gender Problems provides medical help and social support for prostitutes. Trafficking in women for prostitution is a problem (see Section 6.f.).

Sexual harassment of women in the workplace, although illegal, reportedly is 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 bans employment discrimination; however, in practice women frequently face hiring and pay discrimination, especially in the emerging private sector. The Labor Code also 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. According to the Central Statistics Bureau, the number of women in the lower income brackets exceeds the number of men by 75 percent, while men outnumber women two to one in upper income levels. The Ministry of Welfare has established a one-person office to deal with gender problems.

In June Parliament adopted a new labor law that is scheduled to take effect in 2002. The new legislation prohibits work and pay discrimination based on gender and requires employers to set equal pay for equal work. The new law also defines workplace gender-based discrimination.

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 constitutional provisions on children provide for various protections, including health care and legal protections against physical abuse; however, these provisions are not enforced fully in practice. Schooling is mandatory through the 9th 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. There is a national Center for the Protection of the Rights of the Child. 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; however, 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 between the ages of 8 and 18. Although in theory the Constitution and the law protect children, these rights are enforced only sporadically in the case of child prostitutes. Trafficking in young girls for prostitution abroad is increasing (see Sections 6.c. and 6.f.).

On April 4, the Dardedze Center Against Abuse, a government-supported organization, was opened in Riga. The center offers multidisciplinary treatment and rehabilitation to victims of child abuse and their families. The center also has a forensic interview room where victims can be interviewed in a secure environment and their testimony directly transmitted to a courtroom.

Persons with Disabilities

The Constitution provides for the protection of persons with disabilities against discrimination; the law provides for their right of access to public facilities. Provisions in the Labor Law and other laws aim to protect persons with disabilities from bias in the workplace and from job discrimination. There is no governmental or societal bias against persons with disabilities. In 1998 the Cabinet adopted a framework document entitled "Equal Opportunity for Everyone," which was designed to coordinate the efforts of all branches of Government in assisting persons with disabilities; however, lack of funding has limited its effectiveness. The Government supports special schools for persons with disabilities.

The law requires buildings to be accessible to wheelchairs; however, the Government does not enforce the law uniformly and most buildings are not wheelchair accessible. However, some larger cities, including Riga and Ventspils, have undertaken an extensive wheelchair ramp building program at intersections.

Religious Minorities

Relations between the various religious communities were generally amicable. Ecumenism still is a new concept in the country, and traditional religions have adopted a distinctly reserved attitude towards the concept. Although government officials encouraged a broader understanding of and acceptance of newer religions, suspicions remained towards newer nontraditional faiths.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Approximately 1 million persons are of non-Latvian ethnicity, including more than 700,000 ethnic Russians, 100,000 ethnic Belarussians, 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, Belarussian; 9 percent, Ukrainian; and smaller percentages of Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Roma, Germans, Tatars, Estonians, and Armenians. Owing to the Russification policy pursued during the Soviet era, ethnic Latvians constitute only 56 percent of the population, and 78 percent of citizens. Ethnic Latvians constitute less than 40 percent of the population in three of the country's seven cities, including the capital city of Riga.

Ethnicity is identified in the passport of citizens but not in the passports of noncitizen residents. Groups such as Roma and Belarussians have complained that, because the passport is a basic form of identification, they

are subject to various forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, because of this requirement.

A small right-wing publisher, Aivars Garda, attempted to foment animosity towards the Russian-speaking minority through a series of antiethnic Russian publicity stunts. In each instance, the President and Prime Minister denounced his actions.

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 46,700 persons have become citizens, 14,000 were naturalized in 2000; and an additional 9,000 were naturalized during the year. To facilitate the naturalization process, the Government reduced significantly the naturalization fee and accepts high school level language certificates as sufficient for naturalization purposes. In November, in order to increase the rate of naturalization, the Latvian Naturalization Board also implemented an advertising campaign in cooperation with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the U.N. Development Program, and other international donors.

The Citizenship Law includes a Latvian language and residence requirement for those seeking to naturalize, as well as restrictions on the naturalization of 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 the country. According to Naturalization Board figures, nearly 95 percent of applicants pass the citizenship tests on the first attempt. Children of noncitizens born after August 1992 are entitled to citizenship upon application. International observers, including the resident OSCE mission, have credited the Government with establishing a competent and professional Naturalization Board with offices throughout the country to implement the law and generally applying the law fairly. However, international experts, government officials, and domestic human rights monitors have agreed that the country 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.

In December 1999, the Parliament passed a revision 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, except in cases of emergency, including company reports and records. 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. However, the implementation of this law remains a matter of public debate and continued international attention.

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 continued to implement 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 stipulates that workers, except for the uniformed military, have the right to form and join labor unions of their own choosing, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, the Government's ability to protect the right to organize in the private sector is weak. Union membership is approximately 240,000 out of a workforce of 800,000. 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 were reported.

Unions are free to affiliate in confederations, and there is one such confederation in the country. Unions also 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 generally free of government interference in their negotiations with employers. Collective bargaining agreements are common, and are negotiated by industry or company. The law prohibits discrimination against union members and organizers. While not widespread, discrimination occurs within individual companies.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor; however, trafficking in women for prostitution is a problem (see Section 6.f.). Inspectors from the Ministry of Welfare's State Labor Inspection Board or Inspectorate are responsible for enforcing the law.

The law prohibits forced and bonded labor by children; however, trafficking in young girls for prostitution is a 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. State authorities are lax in their enforcement of child labor laws.

The Government has not ratified ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labor.

The law prohibits forced and bonded child labor; however, trafficking in young girls for prostitution is a problem (see Section 6.f.).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The monthly legally mandated minimum wage is approximately \$98 (60 lats), far below the amount that trade union officials describe as the bare minimum necessary for survival; it does not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. The actual average monthly minimum wage (the calculation of which includes wages of part-time employees and agricultural workers) is \$260 (164 lats).

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; however, these standards frequently are ignored. Workers have the legal right to remove themselves from hazardous work situations without endangering their continued employment; however, these standards also frequently are ignored in practice.

f. Trafficking in Persons

There is no law that specifically prohibits all forms of trafficking, although in May 2000, the Criminal Code was revised to make it illegal to send forcibly a person to a foreign country for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Trafficking in women for the purpose of prostitution was a problem.

Latvia is primarily a country of origin and transit for trafficked victims rather than a destination, although no exact statistics are available. The main countries of destination are Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Spain, Greece, Italy, and the United Kingdom, and to a lesser extent Cyprus and Israel. Statistics released by European police services indicate that the number of Latvian women involved as victims of trafficking increased. In 2000 273 women (not all necessarily involved in trafficking) were deported back to the country. According to authorities in Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and Denmark, Latvian women make up a disproportionately high number of the women engaged in prostitution in those countries as well as a high number of trafficked women in those countries in general. There is evidence that trafficking in women (including minors) for prostitution abroad is increasing. Traffickers, primarily organized criminal groups, usually lure victims through offers of false employment in European countries. A large number of victims are drawn from the economically depressed areas of eastern Latvia. Other victims are recruited through job advertisements, modeling agencies, travel agencies, and nightclubs.

During the year, there were 11 criminal cases for trafficking, involving 18 suspects, and these cases were under investigation at year's end. There were no prosecutions of traffickers by year's end.

Over the last 2 years, the Government allocated more resources towards combating trafficking in persons. There is a high-level working group on trafficking, and the Ministry of Interior, which includes the State Police and the Citizenship and Migration Department, is the principal government ministry involved in the trafficking problem. Also participating in the working group are representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Welfare, and the National Center for the Protection of the Rights of the Child. The Government has allocated funds to increase the number of police officers tasked with fighting prostitution and trafficking. However, there is concern among NGO's that the Government has not developed a strategy for focusing on the problem.

There are virtually no trafficking victims assistance programs in the country. Upon returning to the country, victims of trafficking are not singled out for governmental or societal abuse or mistreatment, and they can return home. Genders is the primary NGO involved in working with prostitutes, and two NGO's have begun operations to educate adolescents regarding trafficking issues. On December 10, the Council for Latvian Youth (a Latvian NGO) and the International Organization for Adolescents held a seminar in the town of Dubulti to inform other youth-oriented NGO's about trafficking.

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