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WORLD REPORT | 2020

EVENTS OF 2019



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2020
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Human Rights Watch defends the rights of people worldwide.

We scrupulously investigate abuses, expose facts widely, and pressure those with power to respect rights and secure justice.

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Cover photo: *Protesters in Hong Kong, June 5, 2019.*

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Back cover photo: *Claudio Jose da Silva, the coordinator of the "Forest Guardians" of Caru Indigenous Territory, Maranhao State, at the bank of the Pindare River in June 2018. The Guardians are Tenetehara Indigenous people who patrol the land to detect illegal logging and report it to the authorities.*

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Foreword

World Report 2020 is Human Rights Watch's 30th annual review of human rights practices around the globe. It summarizes key human rights issues in more than 100 countries and territories worldwide, drawing on events from late 2018 through November 2019.

In his keynote essay, Human Rights Watch Executive Director Kenneth Roth examines the increasingly dire threat to the global system for protecting human rights posed by the Chinese government under President Xi Jinping. Deepening and increasingly sophisticated domestic repression show that China's leaders view human rights at home as an existential threat. That, in turn, has led Beijing to see international laws and institutions for the defense of human rights as an existential threat.

As a result, Chinese authorities seek to censor criticism of China overseas, mute attention to human rights in its global engagements, and weaken global rights mechanisms. At stake is a system of governance built on the belief that every person's dignity deserves respect—that regardless of official interests, limits exist on what states can do to people.

Noting that global institutions are built in part “on the belief that every person's dignity deserves respect, that regardless of the official interests at stake, there are limits to what states can do to people,” Roth concludes that China is not simply a new and emerging power finding its place, but a country that poses an existential threat to the international human rights system.

The rest of the volume consists of individual country entries, each of which identifies significant human rights abuses, examines the freedom of local human rights defenders to conduct their work, and surveys the response of key international actors, such as the United Nations, European Union, African Union, United States, China, and various regional and international organizations and institutions.

The book reflects extensive investigative work that Human Rights Watch staff undertook in 2019, usually in close partnership with human rights activists and groups in the country in question. It also reflects the work of our advocacy team, which monitors policy developments and strives to persuade governments and

international institutions to curb abuses and promote human rights. Human Rights Watch publications, issued throughout the year, contain more detailed accounts of many of the issues addressed in the brief summaries in this volume. They can be found on the Human Rights Watch website, www.hrw.org.

As in past years, this report does not include a chapter on every country where Human Rights Watch works, nor does it discuss every issue of importance. The absence of a country or issue often simply reflects staffing or resource limitations and should not be taken as commentary on the significance of the problem. There are many serious human rights violations that Human Rights Watch simply lacks the capacity to address.

The factors we considered in determining the focus of our work in 2019 (and hence the content of this volume) include the number of people affected and the severity of abuse, access to the country and the availability of information about it, the susceptibility of abusive forces to influence, and the importance of addressing certain thematic concerns and of reinforcing the work of local rights organizations.

The World Report does not have separate chapters addressing our thematic work but instead incorporates such material directly into the country entries. Please consult the Human Rights Watch website for more detailed treatment of our work on children's rights; women's rights; arms and military issues; business and human rights; health and human rights; disability rights; the environment and human rights; international justice; terrorism and counterterrorism; refugees and displaced people; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people's rights; and for information about our international film festivals.

The book was edited by Danielle Haas, senior editor at Human Rights Watch, with assistance from Naimah Hakim, Program associate. Grace Choi, director of publications and information design, oversaw production of visual elements and layout.

In September, a special court to address non-conflict related sexual and gender-based violence crimes was launched and operationalized.

Key International Actors

In March, the UN Security Council renewed the mandate of UNMISS for another year, and the UN Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan for another year. The commission presented its report documenting continuing human rights violations, including rape and sexual violence, finding they may amount to war crimes.

The UN Panel of Experts on South Sudan in an April report found that neighboring states likely violated the terms of the UN arms embargo imposed on South Sudan in 2018, including by not providing inspection reports as required, making it impossible for the panel to ascertain whether any new weapons were imported. In July, the UN Security Council voted to renew the UN arms embargo by a year, and extended an asset freeze and global travel ban for eight South Sudanese nationals for their role in the conflict.

In October, the US sanctioned businessmen Ashraf Seed Ahmed Al-Cardinal and Kur Ajing Ater and five companies controlled by Al-Cardinal for their involvement in bribery, kickbacks, and procurement fraud with senior government officials. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union continued to play a key role in mediating the conflict.

In November, president Museveni of Uganda, president of Sudan's Transitional Sovereign Council, Abdal-Fatah Al-Burhan, and Kenya's special envoy on South Sudan, Kalonzo Musyoka, facilitated talks between South Sudanese parties in Kampala, Uganda, where they agreed to the extension of the pre-transitional period by 100 days.

Sri Lanka

On April 21, Easter Sunday, Islamist suicide bombers attacked churches and hotels in Colombo and two other cities, killing over 250 women, men, and children and injuring hundreds more. For the following four months, the government imposed a state of emergency. Hundreds were detained without charge under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Anti-Muslim mobs, sometimes linked to nationalist politicians, and incited by extremist Buddhist monks, attacked Muslim property. Mainstream and social media vilified Sri Lankan Muslims and asylum-seekers, putting them at risk of assault.

In November, Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected president. As defence secretary in the administration of his brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa from 2005-2015, he was accused of numerous crimes, including attacks on journalists and activists, and implicated in alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In May, ethnic Tamil victims' groups marked 10 years since the end of the war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, with protests and vigils against the government's failure to address conflict-related violations and provide redress.

In August, President Maithripala Sirisena appointed Maj. Gen. Shavendra Silva as army chief, a move described by United Nations experts as an "affront to victims." During the last months of fighting in 2009, he led a military division implicated in numerous war crimes.

President Sirisena announced in June he would end a 43-year unofficial moratorium on the death penalty and resume executions.

Despite agreeing to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people from discrimination, the government did not revoke sections 365 and 365A of the penal code, which criminalize same-sex conduct.

Transitional Justice and Security Sector Reform

In March, Sri Lanka supported a consensus resolution of the UN Human Rights Council, requesting that the government "implement fully" the measures set out in a previous resolution of 2015, and encouraging "the adoption of a time-bound implementation strategy." This included a number of commitments to justice

and accountability for violations committed during the 26-year civil war, through an office of missing persons, an office for reparations, and by setting up an independent accountability mechanism including international investigators, prosecutors, and judges.

Despite important initial developments after the 2015 resolution—including lifting severe restrictions on freedom of speech and association, holding consultations, releasing some civilian land held by the military, and re-establishing an independent government human rights commission—progress has slowed considerably.

Commissioners were appointed to the Office for Reparations in April. The Office on Missing Persons (OMP) began work in 2018, recording over 14,000 cases, but made little progress in discovering their whereabouts. Relatives of the forcibly disappeared protested against the OMP, questioning its authority and independence.

In July, a court acquitted, due to “lack of evidence,” all 13 policemen accused in the 2006 shooting of five Tamil students in Trincomalee in a case known as “Trinco Five.” The execution-style killing of 17 aid workers in 2006 in Muttur, and the murder of journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge in Colombo in 2009, both of which implicated government security forces, have not resulted in any arrests.

Police identified 14 suspects in the abduction and murder of at least 11 young Tamil men between 2008 and 2009. All of the suspects were naval officers, including the former navy commander, Adm. Wasantha Karannagoda.

Other commitments not met by the government include security sector reform and repealing the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). A Counter Terrorism Act (CTA) to replace the PTA was drafted, but it also contains provisions that would facilitate abuse.

Treatment of Minorities

In the aftermath of the Easter Sunday bombings, anti-Muslim mobs killed one person and caused extensive damage to homes and businesses. About 1,100 Muslim refugees and asylum seekers, including members of the persecuted Ahmadiyya religious community from Pakistan, were subjected to harassment and threats, forcing them to take shelter in crowded and unsanitary temporary refuges.

Despite previous targeting of Muslims, such as in Kandy district in 2018, the government did not adequately protect vulnerable communities, prosecute attackers, or confront virulent anti-Muslim hate speech.

In May, President Sirisena pardoned Gnanasara Thero, a prominent monk and leader of a militant anti-Muslim organization, who was serving a jail sentence for contempt of court.

Tamils, particularly in the Northern Province, continued to face harassment and intrusive surveillance.

Human Rights Defenders

Activists and civil society members, particularly in the north and east of the country, were increasingly subjected to surveillance and harassment. The UN special rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and association, Clément Nyaletossi Voulé, reported undue rights constraints.

Some families of people forcibly disappeared during the war reported intimidation by soldiers. The army also disrupted Tamil memorial events. In May, families of the disappeared from Ampara were at a remembrance ceremony when soldiers arrived and destroyed or removed banners and decorations, and threatened to arrest the participants.

Voulé reported concerns that, particularly in the north and the east, associations proposing to work on subjects including LGBTI rights, disappearances, land rights, and post-conflict reconciliation, were denied registration, and were subject to surveillance and intimidation. Activists said that these problems increased after the Easter Sunday attacks.

Women's and Girls' Rights

The government agreed to revise the 1951 Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act. Activists said the amended law should make 18 the minimum age of marriage, without exception, and that women should not have to obtain a guardian's permission to get married. They also called for a removal of the exemption of penalties for rape of married Muslim girls above the age of 12, and demanded reform in the operation of Qazi courts, which currently have no female judges.

Following the Easter Sunday bombings, the government issued orders forbidding face coverings, especially the veils worn by some Muslim women. Following this order, Muslim women including those wearing other forms of dress, such as headscarves and abayas, faced harassment at work and in public places, and some were denied access to public services such as schools, hospitals, and universities.

Death Penalty

President Sirisena's decision to resume executions of persons sentenced to death was a major setback. The Supreme Court stayed the execution of four prisoners convicted of drug offenses.

Key International Actors

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights strongly criticized the government's failure to implement its human rights commitments, and warned that "continuing impunity risks fueling communal or inter-ethnic violence, and instability." Following the appointment of Gen. Silva as army chief, the UN suspended the use of non-essential Sri Lankan troops as peacekeepers.

The core group presenting the UN Human Rights Council resolution (Canada, Germany, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and the United Kingdom) called on the Sri Lanka government to set a clear timeline to meet its commitments, which it said were essential for "national healing, stability and prosperity."

Sri Lanka has military and security cooperation with the United States, India, and European governments, although the US warned this would be curtailed following Gen. Silva's appointment. Sri Lankan trade with the EU under the GSP+ scheme, links better market access to human rights and labor standards. However, the EU, like other foreign partners, has been muted in its response to Sri Lankan rights abuses.

Sri Lanka is a participant in China's "Belt and Road" Initiative, although there are concerns about the debt burden this is creating, for instance in relation to southern Hambantota Port, control of which has been granted to China for 99 years.

Sudan

Following months of protests, Sudan's president for 30 years, Omar al-Bashir, was ousted in April and replaced by a military council. Following negotiations between the military leaders and opposition groups, a transitional government led by a "sovereign council" composed of military and civilian members replaced the military council in August.

The periods of protests both before and after al-Bashir's ouster was marked by serious human rights violations against protesters, starting December 2018. Government security forces routinely used live ammunition against unarmed protesters, detained activists and political opponents, censored media and blocked access to the internet. After April 11, Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—the paramilitary force known for attacks on civilians in Darfur since 2013—continued the crackdowns. The bloodiest was their attack on the protesters' sit-in in Khartoum on June 3.

Conflicts in Darfur, Southern Kordofan, and Blue Nile continued at low levels, and restrictions on humanitarian aid access persisted. In Darfur, government forces attacked villages in Jebel Mara. The African Union/United Nations mission in Darfur (UNAMID) temporarily halted withdrawal plans in June, in view of national political changes and news that the RSF occupied bases the mission handed over to the government. In May, the ruling military council issued a decree stating that all UNAMID bases be handed over to the RSF, in contravention of United Nations rules and procedures.

The agreement to form the transitional government included setting up a national independent investigation into events of June 3. The agreement also called for accountability for all past abuses under the al-Bashir government. Although women played an important role in the protests, women's rights groups expressed disappointment that few women were included in a transitional government. The government has yet to cooperate with the International Criminal Court (ICC) in respect of cases against al-Bashir and four other men on charges of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Darfur.