

Conditions in prisons were reported to be harsh^[footnote 157], with Human Rights Watch stating that torture and ill-treatment were widespread^[footnote 158]. The Prove They Are Alive! campaign noted that, while some political prisoners had been able to receive visitors, “a large number of the disappeared continue to be held in complete isolation without any contact with the outside world despite the fact that this type of isolation contradicts Turkmenistan’s national legislation and its international commitments”^[footnote 159].

Freedom of expression continued to be severely restricted. All media in Turkmenistan remained under state control, foreign publications were prohibited, and most social media and many internet sites were blocked. The authorities also sought to block the use of VPNs.

Reporters Without Borders ranked Turkmenistan 179 of 180 countries in its World Press Freedom Index^[footnote 160]. Protests or demonstrations were not tolerated by the authorities. There were allegations of imprisonment of at least one person who had shared on social media unapproved information about investigations into COVID-19.

Various reports raised concerns over women’s rights and gender equality. As in 2019, there were reports that some female drivers had been harassed by traffic police, and that women had been prohibited from obtaining or renewing driving licenses (although it appeared that the authorities began to reverse these restrictions towards the end of the year^[footnote 161]). Priority in employment often appeared to be given to men, and women faced obstacles to their professional progress. Unregistered religious marriages reportedly took place, which left women without the protection of the law in cases of divorce, or access to inheritance, and there were complaints of forced marriages in some rural areas where girls were expected to navigate the justice system alone to find help. Parents often prioritised the education of their sons, failing to offer direct assistance and suitable alternatives and leaving girls behind and unable to fulfil their ambitions. The Government appeared to do little to act against such behaviour. The British Embassy in Ashgabat partnered with the UNFPA to support the launch of a hotline service offering women and girls confidential, immediate and evidence-based information on their reproductive rights, existing reproductive health services, and overall health advice, as well as advice on protecting against the risk of domestic violence.

Although Turkmenistan worked with the UN on a partnership agreement, including rule of law and human rights elements, there was little evidence of progress on the range of Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommendations that Turkmenistan accepted in 2018. No mid-term progress report was produced as scheduled in 2020. Turkmenistan did not appear to have worked in partnership with the International Labour Organization to eliminate the use of forced labour in the cotton harvest, despite agreeing to a 2018 UPR recommendation to do so. Turkmenistan accepted the UK’s 2018 UPR recommendation to sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT), but by the end of 2020 had taken no action to put this commitment into effect.

There were reports that Turkmenistan had imprisoned a number of conscientious objectors to military service, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, with no alternative to military service available. The prison sentences were generally for two years, the length of the compulsory military service. It continued to prove difficult to register, or re-register, a religious organisation in Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan continued to criminalise sexual intercourse between men, with a penalty of up to two years imprisonment—it was reported that this law had been applied in 2020^[footnote 162].

International NGOs, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, were not permitted to enter Turkmenistan, and concerns were raised about the difficulty in registering NGOs and about harassment of the few human rights activists in the country^[footnote 163]. There were reports that the families of overseas-based activists had been subject to intimidation by the Turkmen authorities^[footnote 164].

In 2021, we will continue to promote human rights through our policy and project work—including training journalists on media literacy, new media formats and fundamental standards—and will also engage with the Turkmen Government for this purpose.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan continued to move in the right direction in several human rights areas, especially women’s rights and efforts to reduce forced labour. Legislative reform was under consideration regarding civil society and freedom of religion or belief, and a public consultation on decriminalising same-sex relations between men was announced. Through the use of online portals, Uzbekistan took active steps to consult citizens, and the authorities engaged directly with local and international civil society, and the diplomatic community in Tashkent, on its legislative reforms. However, it was unclear how far-reaching these planned legislative reforms might be, and in some areas the situation worsened, in particular the weakening of media freedom and a lack of action on torture allegations.

In comparison to previous years, women’s rights were discussed more openly within government and among the public, in part because the COVID-19 pandemic turned the spotlight on serious issues such as discrimination and domestic violence. The Government took some steps in response, including establishing hotlines for sufferers of domestic abuse, and increasing efforts to highlight support networks and helplines. However, greater legislative change continued to be required: rape within marriage was not explicitly criminalised, women’s property and residency rights remained weak, and divorce continued to be difficult for women, including for those suffering domestic abuse.

The authorities further increased penalties for forced labour, making it a criminal rather than civil offence. The Government ran campaigns to raise public awareness of these legislative changes, and continued to signal its commitment to eradicate forced labour. Uzbekistan ended all state quotas for cotton production, and encouraged private sector investment and mechanisation, all aimed at reducing forced labour.

Uzbekistan announced its intention to hold consultations on reviewing the law criminalising sexual intercourse between men. This announcement was a positive step towards a more open discussion of this issue, in a country where there had been an aversion to accepting same-sex relations. However, these consultations did not take place in 2020, and the nature and timings of the consultations remained unknown. The LGBT+ community in Uzbekistan continued to suffer persecution and discrimination. Anecdotal evidence suggested that the police blackmailed members of the LGBT+ community, and that abuse from religious and nationalist groups grew, often buoyed by local media which reported negatively on LGBT+ issues.

Uzbekistan continued to allow the practice of all major religions, and ensure their protection under the law. In December, the US removed Uzbekistan from its ‘Special Watch List’ for religious freedom, in recognition of continued progress with reform in this area. The Government submitted a draft law on religious freedom to the Venice Commission, reflecting continued openness and engagement on freedom of religion or belief. The Venice Commission responded, and the international community submitted a number of comments and recommendations on the draft, including on the registration of new religious groups, which remained heavily controlled by local authorities. The Government did not respond to these recommendations during 2020. There were also reports that the authorities retained significant control and influence in a number of areas relating to Islam, particularly the control of sermons.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev highlighted in keynote speeches the importance of a more vibrant civil society, and a revised Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Code was under preparation. However, NGO registration remained difficult and opaque and, in many cases, applications to register were repeatedly rejected without explanation by the authorities.

There were reports of torture and mistreatment: at least two individuals died in police custody, and allegations of sexual abuse were made against the police. Despite being raised by the British Embassy, the UN and others, investigations into these and other allegations of torture were rare and lacked transparency. The situation was exacerbated by Uzbekistan’s limited legal definition of torture, and a 15-year statute of limitation.

Closed court hearings remained common, undermining transparency and trust in the legal and judicial processes. As in previous years, numerous individuals claimed to have been denied due process, including access to lawyers.

Despite the progress achieved in 2019, media freedom worsened in 2020. Websites such as Facebook were blocked on several occasions, and there were numerous examples of journalists being pressured to remove or not publish articles that were critical of officials or official policy. For example, one blogger was arrested for live-streaming a protest, was dismissed from their employment and placed in a psychiatric facility, while another was extradited from Kyrgyzstan, allegedly for treason, with his case being dismissed only after intervention at very senior levels. The authorities used COVID-19 as an opportunity to crack down on independent journalism by punishing 'fake news', and several journalists and bloggers were arrested under this charge.

In 2020, the UK used programme funds locally to increase the capacity of state and non-state media to increase the supply of, and access to, engaging and informative high-quality media content in Uzbekistan. We also supported the Uzbek parliament in their establishment of a human rights committee based on the model of the UK's Joint Committee on Human Rights, and worked with a local NGO on the provision of free legal advice to the public on new legislation (including COVID-19 regulations).

In 2021, we shall continue supporting further reforms, civil service capacity building, media freedom and the rule of law. We also intend to work constructively with Uzbekistan at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, particularly on women's rights, preventing torture and media freedom.

Venezuela

The protracted political crisis in Venezuela continued in 2020. The UN's Independent International Fact Finding Mission (IIFFM) found "reasonable grounds to believe that Venezuelan authorities and security forces... planned and executed serious human rights violations, some of which—including arbitrary killings and the systematic use of torture—amount to crimes against humanity"^[footnote 165]. The UN also condemned modern slavery, child labour, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and the exploitation of indigenous populations in the Arco Minero Orinoco mining region. The year ended with Nicolás Maduro tightening his grip on power following fraudulent legislative elections on 6 December.

Extrajudicial executions, torture, sexual violence, the operation of clandestine detention centres, enforced disappearances, and politically motivated arbitrary detentions were among the IIFFM's findings published in September 2020. By tracing the chains of command in the country's security agencies, the IIFFM concluded there were reasonable grounds to believe that the Venezuelan authorities and security forces had planned and executed human rights violations which amounted to crimes against humanity. Following the IIFFM's findings, the UK in December sanctioned three security officials involved in human rights violations under its Global Human Rights sanctions regime. The UK was the first country to take such action following the IIFFM report.

In July, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) exposed illegal deforestation and modern slavery in the Orinoco Mining Arc^[footnote 166]. The mines were largely controlled by armed groups and criminals who carried out extreme punishments and executions. Child labour, human trafficking, sexual exploitation and the exploitation of indigenous populations were reportedly widespread.

The IIFFM and the OHCHR's mandates were renewed for two years in September's session of the UN Human Rights Council. The Prosecutor of the ICC continued to make progress in Venezuela's preliminary examination, after finding that crimes within the jurisdiction of the Court had occurred in the country.

Between 2015 and 2020, regime forces killed 27,856 people in instances of alleged 'resistance to authority'^[footnote 167]. Of the 11,891 violent deaths recorded in 2020, 30% of which were still under investigation at the end of the year, security operations were found to be responsible for over half. Although the total number of deaths in 2020 was lower than in previous years, this was the first time that killings by the police and military forces exceeded those committed by criminals.

The COVID-19 pandemic seriously incapacitated the justice system for most of the year. Fewer than 10% of gender-based violence complaints reached formal court proceedings. With the UK's support, two local organisations, Proyecto Mujeres and Mulier, created and promoted a directory with legal, psychological and emergency services for victims of domestic violence. The UK sponsored a project to educate girls through sports and workshops on leadership, sexual education, public speaking and how to challenge gender-based violence.

The Maduro regime continued to undermine the National Assembly in 2020. In the run-up to December's parliamentary elections, the Maduro-regime controlled Supreme Court suspended the ruling bodies of three opposition parties and replaced them with government supporters, thereby undermining Venezuelans' right to free and fair elections. It also appointed a politicised National Electoral Council (CNE). Leading opposition parties refused to participate in legislative elections that were not free, fair or credible.

The UK and others in the international community, including the US, EU, and members of the Lima Group^[footnote 168], rejected the validity of the elections.

The regime continued to exert pressure on civil society and NGOs. The Centre for Human Rights Defenders and Justice, a local NGO, recorded 303 attacks against human rights defenders (HRDs), ranging from stigmatisation, harassment, cyber-attacks, threats, illegal raids, detentions, to mistreatment and torture. Healthcare workers and journalists sharing or publishing information on social media questioning official data or policies were subjected to regime intimidation. According to IPYS, a local NGO, 198 journalists fell victim to attacks including harassment, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions and even two killings^[footnote 169]. The UK raised the profile of the work of HRDs, funded capacity building programmes, and publicly condemned the harassment of journalists.

Venezuela was placed on Oxfam's list of the top ten countries where the food crisis was more severe and getting worse because of the COVID-19 pandemic^[footnote 170]. The World Food Programme was not allowed to enter the country to support food provision for the 9.3 million people who faced moderate or severe food insecurity^[footnote 171]. Rising food prices, petrol and domestic gas shortages, and defective water and electricity services, were among the significant daily challenges faced by the population, especially outside Caracas. Around 500 to 700 people fled the country daily, even with the borders legally closed. The UK was the third largest donor of ODA funding inside Venezuela, supporting the UN and other international organisations to deliver life-saving programmes to address health, water and sanitation, nutrition and protection. 80% of the £14 million contributed by the UK in 2020 to help with the Venezuela crisis was spent inside Venezuela, with the remainder used for regional programmes addressing the needs of Venezuelan refugees and migrants.

In 2021, the UK will continue to support an independent and diverse civil society in Venezuela, and oppose abuses of power and call out violations of human rights by the regime.

Yemen