

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S HUMAN RIGHTS

APRIL 2024



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This report documents key human rights developments at a national and regional level during 2023, as well as presenting a global analysis of ongoing critical human rights challenges. It includes entries on countries or territories whose human rights situation Amnesty International has monitored during 2023.

The absence of a particular country or territory does not imply that no human rights violations of concern to Amnesty International took place there during the year. Nor is the length of a country entry any basis for a comparison of the extent and depth of Amnesty International's concerns there. This report does not cover extensively the use of the death penalty as Amnesty International issues a separate annual global report on death sentences and executions.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN

Association of Southeast Asian Nations

AU

African Union

BRICS summit

The annual conference of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) group of nations

CEDAW

UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

CEDAW Committee

UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

CERD

International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

CERD Committee

UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

CIA

US Central Intelligence Agency

COP28

The 28th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change

ECOWAS

Economic Community of West African States

Escazú Agreement

Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean

EU

European Union

European Committee for the Prevention of Torture

European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

European Convention on Human Rights

(European) Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms

GDP

Gross domestic product

ICC

International Criminal Court

ICCPR

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

ICESCR

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

ICRC

International Committee of the Red Cross

ILO

International Labour Organization

International Convention against enforced disappearance

International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance

LGBTI

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex

NATO

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NDC

Nationally determined contribution

NGO

Non-governmental organization

OAS

Organization of American States

OCHA

United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs

OHCHR

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

OSCE

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

UK

United Kingdom

UN

United Nations

UN Convention against Torture

Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

UN Refugee Convention

Convention relating to the Status of Refugees

UN Special Rapporteur on climate change

UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change

UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions

UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions

UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty

UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression

UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

UN Special Rapporteur on racism

UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance

UN Special Rapporteur on torture

UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women

UN Special rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences

UNESCO

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNHCR, the UN refugee agency

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNICEF

United Nations Children's Fund

UPR

UN Universal Periodic Review

USA

United States of America

WHO

World Health Organization

PREFACE

I never expected the state of human rights to lead me to reference the 1980s sci-fi film *Back to the Future*. Yet here we are. A world spiralling through time, hurtling backwards past the 1948 promise of universal human rights, even as it spins ever faster forwards into a future overtaken by Big Tech and unregulated generative artificial intelligence (AI).

“AUTHORITARIAN” PRACTICES ON THE RISE

In 2023, V-Dem, the political science research centre, found the number of people living in democracies (broadly defined as countries providing rule of law, constraints on the executive by the legislature and the judiciary, and respect for civil liberties) had regressed to **1985 levels**: to levels before the Berlin Wall fell, before Nelson Mandela was released from prison, before the Cold War ended in the hope that a new era for humanity was about to unfold.

That new era was all too brief and today is as good as gone. Evidence of its passing grew in 2023. “Authoritarian” practices and ideas permeated many governments and societies. North to south, east to west, authoritarian policies ate away at freedoms of expression and association, hit out at gender equality, and eroded sexual and reproductive rights.

The underlying public narratives, based in hatred and rooted in fear, encroached on civic space and demonized marginalized individuals and groups, with refugees, migrants and racialized groups bearing the brunt.

The backlash against women’s rights and gender equality intensified in 2023, with many of the past 20 years’ gains under threat.

In Afghanistan, being a woman or a girl has been de facto criminalized. In 2023, the Taliban passed dozens of official decrees aimed at erasing women from public life. Similarly in Iran, the authorities continued their brutal suppression of “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests and issued hate-ridden official statements calling the unveiling of women a “virus”, a “social illness” and a “disorder”.

In the USA, 15 states implemented total bans on abortion, or bans with extremely limited exceptions, bringing disproportionate impacts on Black and other racialized people. In Poland, at least one woman died because the law denied her the abortion services she needed. Uganda adopted a harsh anti-gay law, while social and political leaders in the US also promoted anti-trans narratives, policies and regulations.

Although the world has never been wealthier, 2023 was, as the World Bank called it, “the year of inequality”. In settings as diverse the UK, Hungary and India, defenders of economic and social rights were among the activists most widely targeted. Climate activists were branded “terrorists” for denouncing governments expanding fossil fuel production and investment. Critics of governments’ handlings of the economy in the Middle East, trade unions in Asia-Pacific were silenced and arbitrarily detained, as were those combating corruption in West Africa.

BACK TO PRE-1948?

However, in 2023, our metaphorical **time machine** also tossed us much further back than 1985 : **a descent into a hell** whose gates had been bolted closed in **1948**. “Never again”, the world had declared in the aftermath of global warfare with its some 55 million civilian deaths, when faced with the abject horror of a Holocaust that saw the extermination of six million Jews and millions of others.

Yet in 2023, the “never again” moral and legal lessons were torn into a million pieces. Following the horrific crimes perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October 2023 – when over 1,000 people, mostly Israeli civilians, were killed, thousands wounded, and some 245 people taken hostage or captive – Israel instigated a campaign of retaliation that became a campaign of collective punishment. It is a campaign of deliberate, indiscriminate bombings of civilians and civilian infrastructure, of denial of humanitarian assistance and an engineered famine.

By the end of 2023, 21,600 Palestinians, mostly civilians, had been killed in the unrelenting bombardment of Gaza, with thousands more missing, believed buried under the rubble. Much of Gaza’s civilian infrastructure has been obliterated, while nearly 1.9 million Palestinians have been internally displaced and deprived of access to adequate food, water, shelter, sanitation and medical assistance.

To be a Palestinian in Gaza today is to be plunged to a far more violent and destructive version of the 1948 “Nakba” or the “catastrophe”, when more than 750,000 Palestinians were forcibly displaced

For millions the world over, Gaza now symbolizes utter moral failure by many of the architects of the post-World War Two system; their failure to uphold the absolute commitment to universality, our common humanity and to our “never again” commitment. The principles enshrined in the UN Charter, the Geneva Conventions, the Genocide Convention, and international human rights law have been dishonoured. That’s clearest in the case of the Israeli authorities. However, Israel is not alone. The USA too has played a leading part, as have some of Europe’s leaders and the EU leadership. So too have those who continue to send arms to Israel, all who failed to denounce Israel’s relentless violations and those who rejected calls for a ceasefire.

Their conduct exemplifies the double standards that Amnesty International has denounced over many years. Yet, powerful actors have now gone further, demonstrating a willingness to put at risk the entirety of the 1948 rule-based order, stripping down the founding principles of common humanity and universality and thus stripping away our global capacity to prevent the very worst.

It all comes hot on the heels of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a violation of the UN Charter and an undermining of the international rule of law. Russia’s aggression has continued to manifest itself in deliberate attacks against civilians, the killing of thousands, and as widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, including Ukraine’s grain storage and export facilities.

China too, another permanent member of the UN Security Council, has acted against international law, by protecting the Myanmar military and its unlawful air strikes, through its practices of arrest and torture, and by shielding itself from international scrutiny for the crimes against humanity it continues to commit, including against the Uighur minority.

THE FUTURE WE DON'T WANT

In 2023, with the much earlier-than-expected launch of ChatGPT-4 and other generative AI tools, we were also thrust faster into the future. If the tech-related abuses witnessed in 2023 are anything to go by, prospects for our future are chilling indeed.

Tech is enabling pervasive erosions of rights: perpetuating racist policies, enabling spreading misinformation and curtailing freedoms of expression. Big Tech ignored or minimized those harms, even in armed conflicts contexts such as in Ethiopia, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Myanmar and Sudan. With the alarming rise in online incitement and other harmful content against both Palestinian and Jewish communities, Europe and the USA also saw marked increases in anti-Muslim and antisemitic hate crimes.

In 2023, States turned increasingly to facial recognition technologies to aid policing of public protests, sporting events and of marginalized communities at large – migrants and refugees in particular. Abusive technologies were relied upon for migration governance and border enforcement, including through border externalization technologies, data analysis software, biometrics and algorithmic decision-making systems.

Despite years of evidence of the human rights violations it enables, spyware remained largely unregulated. In 2023, Amnesty International uncovered use of Pegasus spyware against journalists and civil society activists in Armenia, the Dominican Republic, India and Serbia, while EU-based spyware was sold to states the world over. In response, the European Parliament adopted a resolution in November 2023, criticizing the lack of action to curb abuses by the spyware industry.

However, with tech-outlaws and their rogue technologies left to freely roam the digital Wild West, such human rights violations are likely to escalate in 2024, a landmark electoral year. It is a foreshadowing of a future that is already upon us.

GLOBAL SOLIDARITY

Human rights regressions in 2023 did not go unseen. To the contrary. People around the world have stood up to regression, demonstrating unprecedented global solidarity.

The Israel-Hamas conflict sparked hundreds of protests worldwide, with millions protesting civilian deaths, calling for the release of hostages, demanding a cease fire.

The UN Secretary-General, heads of UN agencies, and humanitarian organizations took unprecedented steps to denounce war crimes committed in southern Israel and Gaza and to call on Israel to respect international law.

The late 2023 UN General Assembly resolutions calling for a ceasefire were adopted with a huge majority while South Africa filed an application before the International Court of Justice, alleging that Israel's conduct in Gaza violated the 1948 Genocide Convention and insisting on the centrality of the post-World War Two international rule-based system.

2023 saw momentum build towards a global regime for fairer taxation, to help prevent tax evasion and avoidance and mobilize resources for lower-income countries. In November, against the wishes of the richer countries, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution tabled by the African Group

establishing an international committee to draft a UN tax convention by June 2025.

In 2023, there were many people who resisted and disrupted forces pushing the world backwards to the conditions of 1985 and of pre-1948; people who marched and protested against forces that would propel us all into a future not of our design. They too have shaped 2023, against all odds.

I hope that in 2048 – or even 3048 – when diplomats and activists look back at the past year, they will find that there were many, many good people around the world who did all they could. Who stood up and spoke out. For the sake of our common humanity.

Agnès Callamard, Secretary General

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GLOBAL ANALYSIS AND REGIONAL OVERVIEWS



GLOBAL ANALYSIS

Human rights abuses were widespread in 2023. States and armed groups frequently perpetrated unlawful attacks and killings in an increasing number of armed conflicts. Authorities across the world repressed dissent by imposing crackdowns on freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly, using unlawful force against protesters, arbitrarily arresting and detaining human rights defenders, political opponents and other activists, and sometimes torturing and otherwise ill-treating them. Many states failed to take measures to fulfil people's rights to food, health, education and a healthy environment, neglecting economic injustices and the climate crisis. Governments often treated refugees and migrants in abusive and racist ways. Deep-rooted discrimination against women, LGBTI people, Indigenous Peoples and racialized or religious communities marginalized these people and put them at disproportionate risk of violence and economic and social rights violations. Multinational corporate actors played roles in some of these abuses. The regional overviews elaborate on these trends at a regional level.

This global analysis focuses on four issues that highlight some of these adverse trends at a global level: the treatment of civilians as expendable in armed conflict; the growing backlash against gender justice; the disproportionate impact of economic crises, climate change and environmental degradation on the most marginalized communities; and the threats of new and existing technologies, including generative artificial intelligence (AI). They represent, from Amnesty International's perspective, critical challenges for human rights across the world in 2024 and beyond. States must take concerted action to tackle them and prevent further conflicts and crises emerging or deepening.

TREATMENT OF CIVILIANS IN ARMED CONFLICT

States and armed groups have treated civilians as expendable in armed conflicts, some of which are partly rooted in racial and ethnic discrimination. The current international system has generally been unable to take immediate and effective action to protect them, hamstrung at times by racist double standards and rivalries between powerful states.

VIOLATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

The breaking and bending of international humanitarian law, also known as the laws of war, has had devastating consequences for civilians. In many conflicts, government forces have relied on long-range ground and air attacks using weapons with wide-area effects against populated areas. This has contributed significantly to mass civilian casualties and extensive destruction of homes and infrastructure.

Some parties to conflicts have acted as though respecting international humanitarian law rules is optional. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has been marked by persistent war crimes; Russian forces have indiscriminately attacked populated areas and civilian energy and grain export infrastructure, tortured or otherwise ill-treated prisoners of war and caused vast environmental contamination through acts including the apparently deliberate destruction of the Kakhovka dam. Myanmar's military and associated militias have conducted targeted attacks against civilians, as well as indiscriminate attacks, resulting in over 1,000 civilian deaths in 2023. Yet the Russian and Myanmar governments have rarely responded to reports

of glaring violations, let alone committed to investigating them. Both have received financial and military support from China.

In Sudan, both the warring parties, the Sudan Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, have demonstrated little concern for international humanitarian law as they carry out targeted attacks that have killed and injured civilians and launch explosive weapons from densely populated neighbourhoods. Between the eruption of fighting in April 2023 and the end of the year, more than 12,000 people had been killed, over 5.8 million others had been internally displaced and about 1.4 million had fled the country as refugees.

The Israeli authorities have made particular efforts to frame the attacks that they have carried out on Gaza as complying with international humanitarian law. In reality, they have made a mockery of some of its core norms. They have disregarded the principles of distinction and proportionality with their acceptance of enormous civilian casualties and massive destruction of civilian objects. By the end of 2023, their relentless bombardment and ground offensive had killed, according to Gaza's health ministry, 21,600 Palestinians, a third of whom were children. Evidence of war crimes mounted as Israeli forces bombed crowded refugee camps and residential buildings, repeatedly wiping out entire families and destroying hospitals, UN-run schools, bakeries and other crucial infrastructure. They framed their evacuation orders of northern Gaza as effective warnings and precautions but, in practice, forcibly displaced nearly 1.9 million Palestinians (83% of the total population of Gaza of 2.3 million) from their homes and deliberately denied them humanitarian aid as part of the ongoing illegal blockade of Gaza. These and other factors, including the increase in racist and dehumanizing rhetoric against Palestinians by some Israeli government officials, were warning signs of genocide.

Meanwhile, Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups have justified the attack they undertook on 7 October 2023, prior to Israel's bombardment and ground offensive, as resistance to Israel's long-standing military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. However, the deliberate killing of hundreds of civilians in Israel, hostage-taking, and the firing of indiscriminate rockets into Israel, among other crimes, flouted international humanitarian law and amounted to war crimes.

Despite the staggering levels of civilian bloodshed, destruction and suffering in Gaza, the USA and many European states publicly backed Israel's approach. Some states, particularly the USA, continued to arm Israel with weapons used in flagrant violations of human rights. Given their well-founded protestations about war crimes by Russia and Hamas, those states have exhibited gross double standards, undermining respect for international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians. South Africa brought a case against Israel to the International Court of Justice regarding breaches of the 1948 Genocide Convention in Gaza.

Government forces and armed groups similarly disregarded international humanitarian law in armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Libya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen in 2023. Civilians bore the brunt of indiscriminate and other unlawful attacks, some of which constituted war crimes.

Gender-based violence has been a key feature of some of these conflicts. In a broader context of sexual violence by the Eritrean Defence Forces, soldiers abducted at least 15 women and held them for nearly three months at a military camp in Ethiopia's Tigray region, raping them repeatedly. In the DRC, over 38,000 sexual violence cases were reported in Nord-Kivu province alone during the first quarter of 2023.

Governments have clamped down at home on voices criticizing military actions and their impact on civilians. Russia raised war-time censorship to new heights in 2023. Human rights defenders, media and political activists working in conflict and post-conflict settings have been attacked. Women human rights defenders have faced particular challenges.¹

RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION

Racism lies at the heart of some of these armed conflicts and the responses to them.

The deep roots of the conflict in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories lie partly in an extreme form of racial discrimination – Israel’s ongoing system of apartheid against Palestinians – by which Israel oppresses and dominates Palestinians through territorial fragmentation, segregation and control, dispossession of land and property, and denial of economic and social rights. “Othering” on ethnic lines is a feature of armed conflicts in countries including Ethiopia, Myanmar and Sudan.

Racial discrimination has also manifested itself in responses to these conflicts. Discriminatory double standards have not only been evident in the rhetoric and policies of the USA and many European states towards the conflict in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, but also towards its repercussions. Many governments have imposed unlawful restrictions on protests in solidarity with Palestinians. Governments in Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Switzerland pre-emptively banned such protests in 2023, citing vague risks to public order or national security and, in some cases, racist stereotypes. Media and politicians in the USA, Western Europe and elsewhere have frequently used rhetoric that has dehumanized Palestinians, spread racist discourses and conflated Muslims with terrorists.

In the same context, antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate crimes have increased in Europe and the USA. There has also been an alarming rise in incitement and other harmful content posted online against both Palestinian and Jewish communities more widely. Content posted by Palestinians and advocates of Palestinian rights have reportedly been subjected to potentially discriminatory content moderation by different social media platforms.²

Meanwhile, research on Ethiopia released in October 2023 demonstrated how Meta’s failure to curb incitement on its Facebook platform contributed to killings and other serious human rights abuses against members of the Tigrayan community.³

Racism has also been apparent in the treatment of those fleeing conflicts and other crises. The policies of migration deterrence and externalization that the European Union, other European states and the USA have adopted or maintained have forced people fleeing conflicts, as well as other crises, into dangerous journeys. This has contrasted with their generally positive treatment of Ukrainians seeking safety. In a positive development, Denmark, Finland and Sweden took steps in May 2023 to grant recognition of refugee status as self-evident to Afghan women and girls. However, in general, European countries have failed to provide sufficient safe and regular pathways to protect Afghans and other people fleeing conflicts and serious human rights violations.

INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Multilateral institutions have often been unable or unwilling to pressure parties to armed conflicts to comply with international humanitarian law. While strained resources have been a factor, many actors within these institutions have failed to demonstrate courage or consistently apply their own principles. At worst, their members have displayed cynical and selfish gamesmanship.

The UN Security Council has been unable to take effective action on major conflicts. Predictably the USA weaponized its veto power to repeatedly prevent the Council from calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.⁴ However, its paralysis has extended to issues on which there used to be common ground. In July 2023, it failed to reauthorize the cross-border mechanism for the delivery of humanitarian aid into Syria. Its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict was unable to reach a consensus on grave violations against children in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Somalia and Syria, despite negotiations that continued for more than a year and in some instances, for two or more years.

The UN Human Rights Council has had an inconsistent record on tackling the consequences of armed conflict. In 2023, it established a human rights monitoring mechanism on Sudan and extended human rights reporting on Russia. However, it failed to extend crucial mandates. These included the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, despite the conflict there having led to up to 600,000 civilian deaths and the commission's warnings of an "acute risk of further atrocities". They also included the Fact-Finding Mission on Libya, despite its conclusion that gross violations in the country have continued unabated with impunity. Some states actively opposed the extension of these crucial mandates and states that had previously supported their establishment abandoned this support in the face of resistance.

There were at least signs that the UN was willing to address the dire threats posed by the unregulated development of autonomous weapon systems, which threaten to leave decision-making on life and death to AI-driven algorithms. The UN General Assembly adopted a widely supported resolution in December 2023 stressing the urgent need to address this issue. The UN Secretary-General and the International Committee of the Red Cross have called for states to conclude a legally binding treaty on autonomous weapon systems by 2026.

Accountability for crimes under international law during armed conflicts has generally remained elusive and the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) has increasingly shown double standards and selectivity in the treatment of situations under its scrutiny. The Office of the Prosecutor closed its investigations in Kenya and Uganda and failed to open a previously announced investigation in Nigeria. However, ICC investigations have continued in a number of situations on which Amnesty International has documented crimes under international law. Notably, an ICC arrest warrant was issued against Russian President Vladimir Putin and Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova for alleged war crimes, with an incumbent obligation on all ICC member states to arrest and surrender them, as confirmed by a high court in South Africa. The ICC Prosecutor belatedly issued statements confirming that the ICC's ongoing investigation in the situation in Palestine would cover acts committed in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories on and after 7 October.

In addition, the adoption in May 2023 of the Ljubljana-The Hague Convention on International Cooperation in the Investigation and Prosecution of the Crime of Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity, War Crimes and other International Crimes (Mutual Legal Assistance Convention) will open opportunities for victims of crimes under international law to pursue justice through national courts.⁵

All UN member states should take steps to reform the UN Security Council so that permanent members cannot use their veto power unchecked. They should sign and ratify without reservations the Mutual Legal Assistance Convention. They should address the root causes of conflicts, including racial and ethnic discrimination, and ensure the respect of international humanitarian law in armed conflicts, including the protection of civilians. They should strengthen UN institutions that play a preventative role, including the UN Human Rights Council, the Special Procedures system, and bodies that investigate, report, and preserve evidence of crimes under international law.

BACKLASH AGAINST GENDER JUSTICE

Despite progress in some countries, the backlash against the rights of women, girls and LGBTI people has intensified. Many governments have undermined sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTI rights and failed to tackle gender-based violence.

DISCRIMINATION AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

In recent years, women's rights defenders and civil society organizations have advanced respect for women's rights and sexual and reproductive rights. However, those gains are being undermined. UN Women has warned that gender disparities are worsening.

Some governments have reinforced discrimination against women and girls. In Afghanistan, the authorities have banned women and girls from education beyond primary schools, working with UN offices and NGOs, and employment in most public offices. In Iran, the authorities have intensified their crackdown to enforce veiling. Women in both countries have faced brutal state reprisals for exercising or demanding their rights. In France in 2023, the authorities increased their restrictions on clothing deemed to be religious wear in schools and sport, discriminating against Muslim women and girls.

Progress was made in a few countries on sexual and reproductive rights in 2023. In Honduras, the government ended 14 years of prohibition on the use and sale of the emergency contraceptive pill, although abortion remained banned. In Mexico, the Supreme Court declared the criminalization of abortion unconstitutional. In Finland and Spain access to abortion was facilitated.

However, in other countries, authorities have undermined sexual and reproductive rights, including access to abortion. In the USA, the implementation by 15 states of total bans on abortion or bans with extremely limited exceptions has disproportionately affected Black and other racialized people. In Poland at least one woman died in 2023 as a consequence of being denied abortion services. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have suppressed essential reproductive rights information following the 2022 US Supreme Court decision that ended federal protections for the right to abortion. Those defending abortion rights, including activists and healthcare workers, have been exposed to stigmatization, physical and verbal attacks, intimidation and threats, as well as being criminalized through unjust prosecutions, investigations and arrests.⁶

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The struggle of women's rights defenders has led in recent years to the welcome introduction of some measures to prevent violence against women and girls. Nevertheless, violence against women and girls has continued at an alarming level.

Legal protections to prevent and combat gender-based violence, including sexual and domestic violence, were strengthened in 2023 in countries including Japan, North Macedonia, Switzerland and Uzbekistan. However, authorities across the world have systematically failed to address entrenched gender-based violence and the impunity its perpetrators often enjoy, as well as neglecting the long-term needs of survivors. In Mexico, an average of nine women were murdered each day in 2023. In countries including Algeria and Tunisia, women were subjected to "honour killings". The devastating effects of harmful practices were exemplified by the deaths in 2023 of a 16-year-old who ended her life to escape a forced marriage in Niger and of a two-year-old who was subjected to female genital mutilation in Sierra Leone.

LGBTI PEOPLE'S RIGHTS

Limited progress has been made to protect the rights of LGBTI people in a few countries, but attacks on LGBTI rights have intensified in many others.

There were positive changes to law or policy in several countries in 2023. In Latvia, the authorities recognized civil partnerships. In Taiwan, the authorities recognized the right of most transnational same-sex couples to marry. Namibia's supreme court ruled that spouses of Namibian citizens could regularize their immigration status based on same-sex marriages concluded outside the country. In Finland, Germany and Spain, the authorities facilitated gender self-determination.

However, 62 countries across the world have laws that criminalize same-sex sexual conduct, many of which trace their origins back to colonialism.⁷ In 2023 there was a new wave of legal actions or proposals to diminish LGBTI rights. A new law in Uganda introduced the death penalty for the offence of “aggravated homosexuality”. In Ghana, parliament approved an “anti-gay” bill. Russia adopted new transphobic legislation, Bulgaria ended legal gender recognition for transgender people and the UK blocked the Scottish Gender Recognition Reform Act. In India, the Supreme Court refused to grant legal recognition to same-sex marriage.

There have been arrests and prosecutions of LGBTI people in many regions and restrictions on organizations defending LGBTI rights. In 2023, scores were arrested and, in some cases, even imprisoned under provisions that criminalize consensual same-sex sexual relations in countries including Burundi, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia or for organizing gay weddings or parties in Nigeria. In China, a prominent LGBTI organization was forced to close in the face of the government’s ongoing anti-LGBTI campaign. Russia effectively outlawed any public LGBTI rights-related activity by labelling as “extremist” an undefined “international LGBT movement”.

Violent crimes against LGBTI people have persisted and remained unpunished in many regions. In Guatemala, where same-sex marriage remained illegal, at least 34 people were killed because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. In Lebanon, authorities incited violence against LGBTI people. In Iraq, authorities ordered media to replace the term “homosexuality” with “sexual deviance”.

All governments should support gender justice and allied movements to tackle discrimination against women and reinforce sexual and reproductive rights. They should prioritize programmes to tackle gender-based violence and meet the longer-term needs of survivors. They should advocate the repeal of laws and policies that discriminate against LGBTI people.

IMPACT OF ECONOMIC CRISES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Economic crises, climate change and environmental degradation have disproportionately affected marginalized communities. Human rights defenders campaigning for the rights of these communities have also been targeted as part of the wider repression of dissent.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

The combination of conflict, climate change and the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic have fuelled a range of economic crises. In a context where 4.1 billion people are not covered by any social protection mechanism other than healthcare, these crises have had a deep human rights impact, including high levels of food and fuel insecurity. They also seriously threaten the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals, which reached their midpoint in 2023. A report by the UN Secretary-General in April 2023 revealed that “of around 140 targets with data, only about 12% are on track”. As a result, on current trends 575 million people will be living in extreme poverty in 2030 despite a goal to eradicate it completely.

Economic shocks have deepened national indebtedness in countries already facing debt crises. According to a World Bank report of December 2023, about 60% of the world’s low-income countries were either in or at high risk of debt distress. Many more were spending vast sums of money, which they needed to fulfil human rights, on growing debt repayments. Countries in severe debt distress have included Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Ukraine and Zambia.

While the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization has reported some reductions in global food prices compared to the peak in 2022, prices have remained very high compared to the period before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and in many markets

have continued to rise. At different points in 2023, it was estimated that 78% of Sierra Leone's population were food insecure, 46% of South Sudan's population were experiencing high levels of food insecurity and 5 million people in Somalia were experiencing a food crisis. By mid-December, 93% of people in Gaza were starving, according to the WHO, making them vulnerable to death from otherwise curable diseases, with pregnant and breastfeeding women at particular risk.

Some countries are taking steps to change global tax and other forms of economic governance in order to better support economic and social rights realization. As part of this, there has been progress towards establishing a global regime for fairer taxation that could help mobilize resources for lower-income countries. The UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for a two-step process to negotiate a UN Framework Convention on Effective and Inclusive International Tax Cooperation. It was proposed by Nigeria and backed overwhelmingly, despite opposition from a significant number of higher-income states including EU states, Japan, the UK and the USA.⁸

RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

Extreme weather events and slow onset crises made more likely and more intense by climate change have affected countries at all levels of income, but disproportionately affected lower-income ones. Governments and corporate actors have failed to tackle these adequately or to prevent acute environmental degradation.

Governments, especially those historic and high emitting countries facing heightened obligations under the legal principle of common but differentiated responsibility, have done far too little to phase out fossil fuels and other drivers of climate change. Many have continued to expand fossil fuel infrastructure, including with public funding.

The choice of the United Arab Emirates as the host of the last climate change conference, COP28, proved controversial not least because the state-owned Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, headed by the COP28 president, had announced plans to aggressively expand its fossil fuel production. The COP28 agreement to “transition away” from fossil fuels for energy was the first time that fossil fuels had been mentioned in a COP decision. However, it fell far short of what was needed, leaving loopholes that allow fossil fuel producers and states to continue with business as usual.⁹ Meanwhile, the total of USD 700 million pledged at COP28 to the Loss and Damage Fund, which is intended to assist communities in lower-income countries who are suffering from disastrous weather events and other harms caused by global warming, was barely enough to get it up and running.¹⁰

In more positive developments, several national and regional courts, including courts in Cyprus and Ireland and the European Court of Human Rights, have recognized the right of groups and individuals to file claims that governments have taken insufficient action to tackle climate change or environmental degradation. These cases have the potential to hold governments and fossil fuel companies to account for specific harm and to lay the groundwork for further climate change litigation. Meanwhile, in March 2023, the UN General Assembly backed Vanuatu and other Pacific Island states by asking the International Court of Justice to provide an authoritative opinion on states' obligations and responsibilities surrounding climate change.¹¹

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON MARGINALIZED PEOPLE

Racialized groups, including Indigenous Peoples and others experiencing intersecting discrimination, have suffered disproportionately from the human rights harms associated with economic crises, climate change and environmental degradation.

This disproportionate harm is attributable to several factors, including the cumulative impact of present and past structural and direct discrimination. Consequently, marginalized

communities in countries throughout the world have sometimes been unable to afford or access medication and other essentials, including drinking water, sufficient food and power.

The high death toll among ethnic Rohingya from Cyclone Mocha, which hit Myanmar in May 2023, was largely attributable to the appalling conditions in which they have lived since being forcibly displaced in 2012. The health of those living in poverty and informal sector workers has been particularly damaged by the searing climate change-induced heatwaves in Pakistan. Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized groups have been exceptionally impacted by environmental degradation associated with large-scale extractive projects in regions including the Americas and Asia.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Human rights defenders campaigning for the rights of those adversely affected by economic crises, climate change and environmental degradation continue to be targeted by governments and non-state actors.

Trade unions campaigning to protect workers facing the effect of economic crises and those criticizing their government's handling of economic crises have been targeted in countries from Egypt to South Korea. In West and Central Africa, human rights defenders combating corruption, a significant drain on resources, have been threatened, imprisoned or killed.¹²

They are among large numbers of human rights defenders who have been persecuted, intimidated or even killed within wider patterns of repression of dissent. Three people from the Guapinol community in Honduras were killed in 2023. They had been campaigning against a mining company to protect the river on which their subsistence depends. Human rights defenders have also been among those affected by the new laws or regulations restricting the rights to freedom of expression or association that came into force in 2023 in countries including Bangladesh, China, Cuba, Hungary, India, Jordan, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Singapore and the UK.

Indigenous Peoples, climate justice activists and environmental human rights defenders have faced mass arrests and prosecution when engaging in peaceful acts of civil disobedience. When protesting, they have, like many other activists, been criminalized or been met with excessive or unnecessary use of force. The deployment of kinetic impact projectiles and other types of projectiles against protesters has led to thousands of injuries across the world, including permanent disabilities and scores of deaths.¹³ The continued militarization of the police exacerbates this risk. Major producers of less lethal weapons have irresponsibly supplied them to security forces known for using them unlawfully.¹⁴ It is important then that momentum for a legally binding treaty to control the trade in law enforcement equipment has been growing. In 2023 the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association and the UN Special Rapporteur on torture all expressed their support for a Torture-Free Trade Treaty.

Governments and international financial institutions should implement debt relief, including debt cancellation for countries that are unable to meet their human rights obligations due to high debt repayments. They should invest in universal social protection programmes that fulfil the right to social security for all and work together to establish a proposed Global Fund for Social Protection to support lower-income countries.¹⁵

Governments should cooperate to establish a UN tax convention. They should commit to a full, rapid and equitable fossil fuel phase-out as part of a wider energy transition package. They should work towards a UN Torture-Free Trade Treaty. They must guarantee the protection of human rights defenders.

THREATS OF NEW AND EXISTING TECHNOLOGIES

The emergence of generative AI tools has made headlines in recent months, highlighting the threats that they and existing technologies pose to human rights, particularly the rights of those most marginalized in society. States have not taken sufficient steps to rein in the global trade in spyware or the surveillance-based business model of the biggest technology companies, known as Big Tech.

RISKS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The launch in 2023 of ChatGPT-4, a tool which can synthesize and generate text, has drawn attention to how generative AI will transform people's working lives, their access to government services and their experience of internet platforms more generally. Like any new technology, generative AI may create opportunities but, without adequate and effective regulation, may also exacerbate risks to human rights in areas such as access to welfare, education and employment, labour rights, privacy and online safety. Risks include the reinforcement of racial and other inequalities, increased surveillance and the amplification of hate content online.¹⁶

Existing AI systems, among other technologies, have already amplified inequality and hurt marginalized communities in areas such as access to state services, policing, security and migration.¹⁷ In Serbia, the new semi-automated social welfare system, funded by the World Bank, resulted in possibly thousands of people losing access to vital social assistance and disproportionately affected Roma and people with disabilities. Israel's use of facial recognition technology in the Occupied Palestinian Territories has reinforced restrictions on freedom of movement and helped maintain the system of apartheid. The New York Police Department revealed in 2023 how it used the technology to subject Black Lives Matter protests in the city to surveillance, but pressure mounted on the New York City Council to ban it. Meanwhile, venture capital firms investing in new technologies have often failed in their responsibility to respect human rights.¹⁸

GLOBAL SPYWARE TRADE

States have failed to rein in the global trade in spyware. Research by Amnesty International in 2023 helped uncover the use of Pegasus spyware against journalists and civil society in Armenia, the Dominican Republic, India and Serbia. A major investigation on the Predator Files by the European Investigative Collaborations, in partnership with Amnesty International, uncovered how "EU-based and regulated" spyware has been freely sold to states all over the world.¹⁹ In the aftermath of these revelations, the European Parliament adopted a resolution in November 2023 criticizing the lack of action to curb abuses by the spyware industry. This built on other signs that some policymakers are beginning to act, including a statement from 11 states in March 2023 that recognized the threats spyware presents to human rights.

ABUSES BY BIG TECH

The harms of Big Tech's surveillance-based business model were laid bare again in 2023, not only in the context of armed conflict, but also in how they undermine the rights of children and other young people. TikTok's content recommender system and invasive data collection practices pose a danger to young users of the platform by amplifying depressive and suicidal content that carry the risk of worsening existing mental health challenges.²⁰ There has also been an alarming surge in incitement against LGBTI people on X (formerly Twitter).²¹ The proliferation of political mis- and disinformation is likely to increase, an especially grave risk given the large number of elections taking place in 2024. Repressive political forces in many parts of the world have weaponized social media to attack minorities and pit communities against one another in an effort to bolster their chances of electoral success. Such efforts are

facilitated and exacerbated by the social media algorithms and business models of Big Tech, which prioritize “engagement” and profits at all costs. The risks are aggravated by the emergence of generative AI tools.

Some regulators, on the one hand, and victims seeking remedies, on the other, are making efforts to prevent further abuses. In July 2023, the Court of Justice of the EU delivered a major ruling against the surveillance-based business model underpinning Meta, the company that owns Facebook and Instagram. Shortly afterwards, the Norwegian authorities ordered Meta to stop showing personalized advertisements based on the online activity and estimated location of users in Norway. In the EU, civil society focused on pushing for robust implementation of the landmark Digital Services Act of 2022, the world’s first comprehensive regulation governing Big Tech and promising respect for human rights. However, there have been missed opportunities to address the risks of AI technologies. The EU reached an agreement on the EU Artificial Intelligence Act in 2023, but the final text did not go far enough to prevent harm and may even contribute to the expansion and legitimization of the surveillance activities of police and migration authorities.

Governments should immediately ban highly invasive spyware and facial recognition technology. They should take robust legislative and regulatory steps to address the risks and harms caused by AI technologies. They should rein in Big Tech, particularly by addressing the harms of its surveillance-based business model.

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EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA REGIONAL OVERVIEW

EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

Human rights and freedoms remained under profound and constant assault, fuelled by Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine which drove hardening authoritarianism across the region. Governments persecuted human rights defenders, suppressed dissent and often effectively criminalized the right to free expression and independent human rights information as “fake news” and attempts to “discredit” policies or institutions. Prospects for effective human rights promotion and protection were bleak.

War became a “new normal” in the region. Azerbaijan's blockade of a key route into the breakaway territory of Nagorno-Karabakh created a humanitarian crisis endangering the lives of thousands of people and, following its military offensive, over 100,000 people were displaced to Armenia almost overnight.

Russia's unceasing aggression against Ukraine grew into a war of attrition, with the list of war crimes and other crimes under international law constantly increasing. Civilians, including children, endured egregious suffering, through loss of life and injuries, destruction of homes and key infrastructure, continued mass displacement and environmental danger and destruction.

Efforts to establish international justice mechanisms prompted by the war in Ukraine and including on the crime of aggression, failed to deliver. The ICC issued an arrest warrant for President Vladimir Putin but Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Saudi Arabia were among non-ICC parties which hosted his visits.

Beyond the military conflicts, discrimination and reprisals against religious minorities were common. Torture and other ill-treatment remained endemic and those suspected of criminal responsibility enjoyed impunity. Violence against women and domestic violence persisted at high levels. Gender rights were in retreat. Air pollution, mainly from the burning of fossil fuels, blighted human health in countries across the region.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Freedom of expression spiralled severely downwards as a growing palette of reprisals was deployed against critical voices, spanning accusations of “extremism”, “justification of terrorism”, “dissemination of knowingly false information” and LGBTI “propaganda”.

Russia reached new heights of wartime censorship, sparing none among dissenting voices. Thousands were penalized, and hundreds faced unfounded criminal prosecution, including opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza, sentenced to 25 years for “state treason”.

Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan amongst others locked up scores of government critics. Kyrgyzstan's draft media law forbade dissemination of “materials that harm the health and morality of the population”. In Turkmenistan, free information remained suppressed such that shortages of essential food items and forced labour were hidden from view.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

Throughout the region civil society was constrained or shut down, with Russia continuing to provide a vicious blueprint. There, an ever-growing number of individuals and civil society

organizations were labelled “foreign agents” or “undesirable organizations”, limiting their participation in public life. The criminal code was also amended to penalize “carrying out activities” of foreign NGOs without registered offices in Russia, effectively criminalizing any forms of cooperation with most civil society groups outside the country. Leading human rights organizations including the Moscow Helsinki Group, Sakharov Centre and Sova Centre were shut down.

Belarus closed prominent human rights group Viasna, among scores of other independent civil society organizations, and imprisoned its leading members for years. Kyrgyzstan plumbed new depths when a draft law “On Foreign Representatives”, modelled on Russia’s “foreign agents” law, moved toward adoption and threatened the closure of numerous NGOs. In Moldova, Shansa party members were arbitrarily denied the possibility of standing in local elections.

In a rare story of success, widespread public protest in Georgia against a draft Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence forced its withdrawal.

FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

Authorities across the region severely restricted peaceful street protest, already rare or non-existent in many countries, while large pro-government rallies were held in Russia and elsewhere. Unlawful use of force by law enforcement was a norm. Kyrgyzstan imposed a near blanket ban on peaceful demonstrations in the capital Bishkek and in some regions. Authorities in Belarus and Kazakhstan continued to identify and jail peaceful participants in past protests.

Police in Georgia deployed tear gas and water cannons to break up a largely peaceful protest in March. In Turkmenistan, police used unnecessary and disproportionate force to stop protests against bread shortages.

Authorities must stop using pretexts to repress dissent and prevent discussion of their human rights records. They must end the harassment and prosecution of critical voices, stop security forces using unlawful force during protests and repeal or amend legislation violating the right to peaceful assembly.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF

Discrimination and reprisals against religious minorities were common across the region. Tajikistan continued with repressive practices against Ismailis including penalizing collective prayer in private homes. Jehovah’s Witnesses were imprisoned for practising their faith in Russia and Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories, and law enforcement authorities targeted Catholic priests in Belarus and those of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (effectively subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church) in Ukraine. Devout Muslims in Uzbekistan continued to be prosecuted on overly broad and vaguely worded extremism-related charges.

Governments must take effective measures to implement legal and policy reforms to fully protect, promote and guarantee freedom of religion or belief without discrimination.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

In many countries torture and other ill-treatment remained endemic and those suspected of criminal responsibility enjoyed impunity. In Belarus those imprisoned under politically motivated charges faced inhumane conditions, including incommunicado detention and lack of adequate healthcare. In Kazakhstan, five of the six officially acknowledged cases of death caused by torture following protests in January 2022 reached court by the end of 2023, while most others were dropped for alleged lack of evidence. In Moldova detainees continued to suffer overcrowding and unsanitary conditions and poor health provision. In Georgia former president Mikheil Saakashvili was denied release on humanitarian grounds despite severely

deteriorating health and reported lack of adequate medical care. Aleksei Navalny in Russia was subjected to enforced disappearance and repeated arbitrary solitary confinement.

Governments must act urgently to end torture and other ill-treatment, bringing all those suspected of criminal responsibility to justice in fair trials.

GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE

In Uzbekistan, domestic violence was criminalized for the first time. However, war and legislation entrenching “traditional” and “family” values framed increasing gender-based violence and violence against women in the region. In Ukraine, an all-time high of domestic violence was recorded amidst the raging war, and Kyrgyzstan saw widespread abuse and sexual violence against children with disabilities, including girls. Sexist, misogynist language against political opponents, especially by the ruling party, was on the rise in Georgia, while women in Azerbaijan faced various forms of gender-based violence, including being targeted as instruments of political revenge.

Governments must implement comprehensive policies to prevent gender-based violence against women and girls, including by tackling entrenched gender discrimination and harmful stereotypes, ensure access to protection and support for survivors and address impunity for related crimes.

VIOLATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine was marked by persistent war crimes. Indiscriminate attacks by Russian forces on populated areas and civilian energy and grain export infrastructure were common. Both Russian and Ukrainian forces used cluster munitions despite their inherently indiscriminate nature and lasting risks for civilians. Ukraine was estimated as the world’s most heavily mined country. Torture and other ill-treatment of prisoners of war in Russia and Russian occupied territories of Ukraine was widespread. A Moscow court upheld a 13-year sentence against Ukrainian human rights defender Maksym Butkevych for a purported war crime he could not have committed.

Further to Azerbaijan’s military takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh, no progress was reported in investigating violations of international humanitarian law by either Azerbaijani or Armenian forces, including disproportionate and indiscriminate attacks and reports of torture and killings of captives in previous years in that region.

All allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity should be subject to impartial and independent investigations, including through the principle of universal jurisdiction.

UNFAIR TRIALS

Judicial systems in many countries were deployed to crack down on rather than protect human rights.

In Russia, courts demonstrated a profound bias against defendants and trials on charges of terrorism, extremism and high treason were habitually closed to the public.

The Belarusian judiciary continued to be weaponized to crack down on all dissent including by lawyers and human rights defenders. Sviatlana Tsikhnouskaya, Pavel Latushka, Maria Maroz, Volha Kavalkova and Sharhei Dyleuski were sentenced in their absence to lengthy prison sentences on trumped-up charges, while Nasta Loika was sent to prison for seven years. In Kazakhstan, celebrated athlete Marat Zhylanbayev was sentenced to seven years in prison for peaceful dissent. The US Department of State sanctioned four Georgian judges for corruption for abusing their position and undermining the judicial system.

The UN expressed deep concern about the overly broad definition of terrorist organizations in Tajikistan which made possible the application of emergency measures and restrictions on due process. When Germany deported asylum seeker Abdullohi Shamsiddin to Tajikistan, he was

forcibly disappeared before being sentenced to a seven-year term. In Uzbekistan dozens connected to the 2022 mass protests in Karakalpakstan were convicted in unfair trials on politically motivated charges.

CHILDREN'S AND OLDER PEOPLE'S RIGHTS

While Russia's war in Ukraine created acute suffering and deprivation for all Ukrainians, children and older people were made more vulnerable.

UN data in November indicated that at least 569 children killed and over 1,229 were injured since February 2022. Estimated numbers of children unlawfully transferred by occupying Russian authorities to Russian occupied territories or to Russia itself was in the hundreds and possibly thousands. In March the ICC issued arrest warrants for President Vladimir Putin and Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova for their role in this war crime.

Older people were disproportionately affected by the conflict, killed and injured at higher rates than any other civilians. Those displaced struggled to access private housing independently, and temporary shelters typically remained physically inaccessible for older people, particularly those with disabilities.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

Military conflict in the region continued to impact on economic and social rights. For nine months until its offensive in September, Azerbaijan's blockade of the Lachin corridor, a road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, caused critical shortages of basic necessities including food, medicines and fuel resulting in a humanitarian crisis in the breakaway region.

In September, in a serious attempt to unlawfully indoctrinate school children, high school students across Russia as well as occupied territories of Ukraine were issued new "unified" history textbooks which sought to whitewash the historical human rights record of Russian and Soviet authorities. Children in Russian-occupied territories were forced to learn the Ukrainian curriculum "in hiding", to avoid reprisals.

Governments must ensure the rights of everyone to an adequate standard of living, and access to quality education.

REFUGEES' AND MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

People on the move continued to suffer across the region. Belarusian authorities violently forced migrants across EU borders where they faced pushbacks, and in Russia authorities used deception and pressure to recruit migrants into military service. The over 100,000 ethnic Armenians displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia faced economic hardship and uncertainty about the prospects of return.

Governments must ensure all those fleeing persecution and human rights violations have access to safety and international protection, and that no one is returned to face serious human rights abuses.

RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

World War II-style military combat in Ukraine and countries who are major fossil fuel producers and emitters in the region spurred vast environmental destruction and pollution.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine produced severe air, water and land contamination, and unmanageable quantities of hazardous waste. The Kakhovka dam was destroyed in what appeared to be a deliberate military act widely believed to have been committed by Russian forces, resulting in waste contamination with long lasting ecological consequences beyond Ukraine's borders.

Human health also suffered from air pollution, mainly from the burning of fossil fuels. Such pollution was estimated to cause over 10,000 excess deaths annually in Kazakhstan, and 18%

of deaths from stroke and ischaemic heart disease in Belarus. Kyrgyzstan's capital was ranked one of the most polluted in the world.

Across the region, those seeking to protect the environment themselves suffered severe reprisals. Activists opposing a gold mining project in Armenia faced lawsuits seeking excessive financial compensation for the supposed harm to business caused by their environmental criticism. In Russia two major environmental NGOs were designated as “undesirable” and banned from the country.

Governments must take immediate measures to protect individuals and communities against the risks and impacts of climate change and extreme weather conditions, including by seeking international assistance and cooperation to take sufficient climate adaptation and mitigation measures.

LGBTI PEOPLE'S RIGHTS

In Ukraine, a draft law on civil partnerships, including for same-sex couples, was registered in March, though it did not address the prohibition on child adoption by same-sex couples.

Russia, however, adopted new transphobic legislation and effectively outlawed any public LGBTI people's rights-related activity by labelling as “extremist” an undefined “international public LGBT movement”. In Central Asia and beyond, gender rights were in retreat, with Kyrgyzstan proposing legislative amendments to prohibit information that “denies family values” and promotes “non-traditional sexual relationships”, while in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan consensual same-sex sexual relations remained a crime.

Governments should repeal laws, policies and practices that discriminate against LGBTI people, including by decriminalizing consensual same-sex sexual relations and removing legal obstacles to same-sex marriage.

WESTERN, CENTRAL AND SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE

In 2023 politicians in many European countries fomented social polarization on women's and LGBTI rights, migration, climate justice, and the horrific events in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (Israel/OPT). Many governments instrumentalized human rights to stigmatize various groups and enacted disproportionate restrictions on civic space, targeting climate protesters, people expressing dissenting views, particularly regarding solidarity with Palestinians, Muslims and other racialized individuals.

Systemic racism continued to violate rights and cost lives. States maintained policies of racialized exclusion towards people from Africa, the Middle East and Asia that resulted in deaths and harm being inflicted on people at sea and land borders. Governments did little to address the continued discrimination and segregation of Roma. The failure of states to implement anti-racism measures and the political exploitation of racism formed the backdrop to a spike in reports of antisemitism and anti-Muslim racism.

There was both progress and regression on gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive rights. The slide to surveillance societies continued. The most vulnerable, including people with disabilities, suffered inadequate social protection.

Double standards were evident in the rhetoric and policies of many states: towards Israel versus the simultaneous restrictions imposed on solidarity for Palestinian human rights; warm words at COP28 while continuing the use and production of fossil fuels and cracking down on protesters; and the complacency towards human rights backsliding within Europe but criticism of states outside the region.

REFUGEES' AND MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

EU member states maintained deadly policies of racialized exclusion and externalization, and made little progress on responsibility-sharing within the EU. Negotiations on EU asylum reforms pointed to a compromise that would reduce safeguards and increase suffering for people seeking safety. States failed to establish safe and legal routes, instead subjecting people to abuse and unnecessary danger at land and sea borders. More than 600 racialized people including children died in a shipwreck off Pylos in Greece in one such incident alone, and hundreds of others from Africa, the Middle East and Asia were subjected to abuse and violence throughout the year as unlawful, summary forced returns remained a daily occurrence at borders across Europe.

The European Commission failed to trigger infringement proceedings against Latvia and Lithuania after they introduced the possibility of summary returns into domestic legislation. Impunity for violations at borders persisted: Spain failed to investigate effectively the 2022 deaths, torture and unlawful expulsions between Melilla and Morocco.

Some European countries failed to ensure the rights of Afghans to seek safety. In Germany, a humanitarian admission programme meant to admit 1,000 Afghan people per month benefited less than 100. Denmark, Finland and Sweden took positive steps to grant prima facie recognition of refugee status to Afghan women and girls.

Refugees and migrants faced attacks in the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Germany and Greece. Many politicians engaged in discriminatory and racist rhetoric which targeted refugee and migrant communities, including in Türkiye in the context of elections.

European states continued to externalize border control, disregarding human rights. More countries sought agreements on offshore processing of asylum seekers, such as Italy with Albania, while advancing an EU deal with Tunisia that risked rights violations. Cooperation with Türkiye, where thousands of people were subjected to refoulement, continued. Despite losing legal challenges, the UK government seemed intent on implementing its plan to transfer asylum seekers to Rwanda for processing of their asylum applications.

Governments must put an end to policies of racialized exclusion. They must instead ensure that policies and practices protect, respect and fulfil the right to life of refugees and migrants, establish safe and legal routes and uphold people's right to asylum at borders.

WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' RIGHTS

Latvia ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, while North Macedonia harmonized its laws with the treaty. Croatia announced that femicide would be a separate offence. Switzerland adopted a consent-based definition of rape and the Netherlands marked progress towards adopting such a definition.

Many countries, however, reported high figures for gender-based violence against women and girls against a backdrop of inadequate state actions to tackle it. Monitors in Albania, Austria, Greece, Italy, Serbia, Spain and Türkiye each reported dozens, if not hundreds, of femicides. The live-streaming of a killing in Bosnia and Herzegovina sparked protests, as did the mild punishment of a perpetrator in Bulgaria.

While a law in Finland entered into force allowing abortion on request in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, and Spain passed a bill to allow abortions for 16-17-year-olds without parental consent, several countries retained restrictions on abortion. In Poland at least one woman died as a consequence of being denied abortion services. In Croatia, Ireland, Italy and Northern Ireland, health personnel frequently invoked conscience clauses. Some Austrian regions excluded abortion from the health system, while the Czech Republic saw care refused to non-

Czech EU citizens. Legislation banning abortion in Malta was amended but access remained highly restricted. Andorra was the only country with a total ban.

Governments must urgently combat all forms of gender-based violence and address their root causes.

RIGHT TO PRIVACY

Several cities and cantons in Switzerland adopted bans on facial recognition in public spaces. In France, however, a new law authorized mass biometric surveillance for the 2024 Olympics.

Amnesty International revealed that the Intellexa Alliance of companies traded Predator spyware to many countries, including Austria, Switzerland, and Germany, and uncovered Predator use against a Berlin news site, European institutions, and researchers. In Spain, at least 65 people, mostly in Catalonia, were targeted by Pegasus spyware.

RIGHT TO A FAIR TRIAL AND EROSION OF JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE

Hungary, Poland and Türkiye continued to undermine judicial independence. Hungary took steps to limit the powers of the judiciary. In Poland, the government targeted critical judges. In Türkiye, the Court of Cassation refused to implement a Constitutional Court ruling, accusing its judges of overreach.

Governments must stop the slide to surveillance societies, respect the right to a fair trial, and end the erosion of judicial independence.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Attacks against journalists were recorded in countries across the region. Türkiye continued to arrest or detain many journalists for bogus terrorism-related offences.

Politicians and businesses used strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPP) suits to silence journalists or activists in Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, North Macedonia and Serbia. While Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina criminalized defamation, Bulgaria reduced fines for defamation against public officials and Croatia adopted a plan envisaging the early dismissal of SLAPPs.

With few exceptions, states across the region proposed or adopted measures to disproportionately restrict views, including online, critical of Israel's bombing campaign in Gaza and in support of Palestinian human rights.

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

As the climate emergency deepened, peaceful protests increased, prompting harsh responses by authorities. Climate protesters engaging in peaceful acts of civil disobedience faced mass arrests, prosecution for harsh crimes and smear campaigns.

Many countries enacted disproportionate restrictions on assemblies. In the Netherlands, police used unlawful ID checks as a surveillance tool against protesters. In France, Italy, Serbia and Türkiye, among others, law enforcement often engaged in unlawful use of force as well as discriminatory policing.

Many governments imposed unlawful restrictions on protests in solidarity with Palestinians. Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Switzerland and others pre-emptively banned such protests, citing vague risks to public order or national security. Media and politicians frequently used rhetoric that dehumanized Palestinians, spread racist stereotypes and conflated Muslims with terrorists.

France invoked counterterrorism legislation to ban peaceful protests and carried out arbitrary arrests. During the Prides, Turkish police implemented blanket bans, used unnecessary force, and arrested 224 people. The UK passed a bill expanding police powers, creating protest banning orders and allowing civil injunctions.

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

France continued to pursue the dissolution of several NGOs without due process. Türkiye intensified the use of intrusive NGO audits. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska passed a law creating a registry of foreign-funded NGOs. In Hungary the government introduced a new law to limit foreign funding for NGOs.

The space for all to exercise the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly must be protected from state overreach.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Human rights defenders working on women's or migrants' rights were frequent targets of repression. In Andorra, an activist faced steep fines after speaking out against the abortion ban. In Poland, Justyna Wydrzyńska received eight months of community service for assisting a woman to access abortion pills. In Greece, migrants' rights defenders Sarah Mardini and Séan Binder were indicted for four felonies. Latvian authorities opened criminal proceedings against two defenders for humanitarian work at the Belarus border. Türkiye upheld the conviction of Osman Kavala, defying judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

Governments should protect human rights defenders and recognize their crucial role, rather than stigmatizing and criminalizing their activities.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Racial profiling by law enforcement remained common. The French Council of State acknowledged discriminatory police checks but proposed no action. The Netherlands border police were found guilty of racial profiling. In the UK, a report flagged institutional discrimination in London's Metropolitan Police.

Germany reported record rates of hate crimes. The ECtHR again condemned Bosnia and Herzegovina for discriminatory electoral rules. In Latvia and Lithuania, some citizens of Russia faced the loss of residence permits.

Roma faced discrimination, segregation and social exclusion. The European Committee on Social Rights found Italy had violated Roma housing rights, while courts in Slovakia found that segregated classes for Roma pupils were discriminatory. The Bulgarian equality body investigated denial of entry for Roma to swimming pools. In North Macedonia, a Roma man died after being denied treatment due to the lack of an ID card; in Romania, a pregnant deaf Roma woman was denied medical care at a hospital and gave birth on the pavement.

In France, Muslim women were especially targeted for restrictions in sport and education. Antisemitic and anti-Muslim discriminatory speech and hate crimes spiked across the region as horrific events unfolded in Israel/OPT.

In the aftermath of the February earthquakes in Türkiye, civilians and state actors targeted migrants and refugees helping search and rescue with racist abuse.

LGBTI PEOPLE'S RIGHTS

Latvia recognized civil partnerships, while Lithuania failed to do so. The ECtHR condemned Bulgaria and Romania for failing to recognize same-sex couples.

Discrimination persisted against LGBTI people. In Croatia and North Macedonia, Prides faced threats and discriminatory speech from both public officials and private individuals. Norwegian police found LGBTI meeting places to be at ongoing risk of violent attacks. In Türkiye, politicians used discriminatory rhetoric against LGBTI people.

Although Hungary faced legal action in the Court of Justice of the EU for its propaganda law, the authorities fined a bookstore for violating this legislation and the Media Council barred a TV

advertisement on Pride. The ECtHR condemned Lithuania for censorship of a book depicting same-sex relationships.

Transgender rights saw progress and setbacks. Germany abolished the discriminatory exclusion of transgender people, gay and bisexual men from blood donations. A new Self-Determination Act was discussed in parliament, which would enable self-determination for transgender, non-binary and intersex people on the basis of a simple declaration at the registry office. In Finland such recognition became available to adults upon application. In Spain a new law guaranteed access to health services and gender self-determination. However, Bulgaria ended legal gender recognition for transgender people and the UK government blocked the Scottish Gender Recognition Reform Act.

Governments should meaningfully address systemic discrimination including against Jewish people, Muslim people, Black people, Roma and LGBTI people.

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

In Finland, the government announced plans to cut public healthcare and raise user fees and taxes on medicines, which will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable. The European Social Committee deemed admissible a complaint against Greece regarding austerity cuts to healthcare. Slovenia passed a Long-Term Care Act, but faced a shortage of doctors.

Denmark and Finland announced cuts to social assistance. France, Ireland and Portugal had record levels of homelessness. Spain adopted a housing rights law, but failed to protect economically vulnerable people from evictions. In Serbia, the new semi-automated social welfare system resulted in possibly thousands of people losing access to vital social assistance and disproportionately affected Roma and people with disabilities.

The response of the Turkish government after the February earthquakes was inadequate in protecting people with disabilities.

Governments must take immediate action to guarantee all people's economic and social rights, free from discrimination, including by assigning adequate resources and ensuring universal and comprehensive social protection.

RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

In positive moves a Cyprus court recognized an environmental NGO's right to file public interest claims, NGOs in Ireland litigated against the failure to sufficiently reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and young people in Portugal brought a case against 33 countries at the ECtHR for insufficient action on climate change. The Council of Europe recognized politically the right to a healthy environment, but failed to adopt a binding legal instrument on this right.

Many countries, however, continued fossil fuel use. Bulgaria and Romania planned gas exploration in the Black Sea, Greece and Slovakia planned LNG terminals, Malta supported a major gas pipeline, Norway provided tax incentives for oil and gas fields and Germany approved finance for fossil fuel projects. French banks were among the biggest funders of fossil fuel extraction.

Governments should phase out the use and production of fossil fuel through a just transition. They should also urgently scale up climate finance to lower-income countries and commit to providing additional dedicated funding for loss and damage.

legislation remained inadequate to protect Indigenous rights, such as to lands and free, prior and informed consent.

DISCRIMINATION

Despite the national action plan to combat racism, several criminal justice measures aimed at combating crime risked discriminating against and violating the rights of racialized communities, refugees and migrants. New legislation extending the possible use of secret coercive measures such as digital surveillance, telephone tapping and data interception raised concerns that they would be used disproportionately against such groups. Other government initiatives risked amplifying racially discriminatory policing and systemic racial discrimination if adopted, such as a proposal to compel public servants to report undocumented people, including children, to the Migration Agency and police.

SWITZERLAND

Swiss Confederation

The law on rape was amended to punish sex perpetrated against a person's consent. Parliament failed to fully decriminalize abortion. A new initiative put the rights of people with disabilities on the agenda. Peaceful protesters in several cantons faced disproportionate restrictions by police and cantonal authorities. Work continued on a definition of torture in the Criminal Code. Refugees and migrants continued to lack support and protection. A large majority voted to strengthen measures against climate change. Automatic facial recognition was banned in several cities.

BACKGROUND

In May, after 20 years of preparation, the Swiss Human Rights Institution was formally established. However, there were concerns about inadequate funding and the lack of a mandate to receive complaints.

Switzerland underwent several international human rights reviews. In the UPR, Switzerland remained unwilling to invest properly in a standing inter-agency mechanism to coordinate the implementation of international human rights obligations, or to commit to ensuring that popular initiatives were fully compatible with international human rights law before being submitted to a vote.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Parliament adopted an amendment to the Criminal Code changing the definition of rape, recognizing that “sex against the will of another person” is rape. The adoption of the law, expected to enter into force in 2024, marked the end of the outdated definition of rape that required the use of physical force, threat or coercion, and considered only women as victims.

Parliament also called for the creation of crisis centres for survivors of gender-based violence in all cantons, and commissioned a study to evaluate the obstacles survivors face when seeking justice.

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

The lower house of parliament rejected by a small majority a parliamentary initiative aimed at fully decriminalizing abortion.

RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Following concerns expressed in 2022 by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a popular “inclusion initiative” was launched to seek legal and effective equality for people with disabilities.

FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

A system requiring authorization for public assembly remained in force. Unauthorized peaceful protests were dispersed by force, including in the cities of Basel and Geneva.

In the cantons of Zurich and Basel-Stadt, the youth wing of a right-wing party launched a popular initiative seeking to further entrench the requirement for demonstrations to be authorized, and to introduce a mandatory financial liability for organizers.

Despite opposition in the cantonal parliament, the initiative in Zurich was due to be put to a vote on 3 March 2024.

Since the beginning of the current armed conflict in Gaza, several German-speaking cities in Switzerland imposed temporary bans on demonstrations.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

The UN Committee against Torture reviewed Switzerland, asking for swift progress on the definition of torture in the Criminal Code, on which parliamentary work was ongoing. This included strengthening the national preventive mechanism and setting up an independent mechanism in every canton to investigate and prosecute allegations of police violence and violence against people in detention.

REFUGEES' AND MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

The European Court of Human Rights criticized Switzerland for rejecting family reunification applications by refugees on the grounds that they were dependent on social assistance. Switzerland continued transferring people to Croatia – including those with health problems or suffering from trauma – despite evidence of summary returns and serious flaws in the Croatian asylum system. Switzerland's resettlement programme remained suspended, depriving refugees of a regular and safe pathway to protection. A state-mandated study identified a need to improve medical care for asylum seekers in federal and cantonal accommodation. The National Commission for the Prevention of Torture expressed concern about the inadequate care of unaccompanied minors in federal asylum centres.

RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

In a referendum in June, 59% of voters confirmed a new climate law aimed at accelerating the shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy and reducing the negative climate impact of the financial sector. Although Amnesty International supported

the law, the measures were insufficient to rapidly phase out all fossil fuels by 2030.

RIGHT TO PRIVACY

After campaigning by Amnesty International and other NGOs, parliamentary initiatives in eight cities and cantons demanded the banning of automatic facial recognition in public spaces. In the cities of Zurich, St. Gallen and Lausanne, and the canton of Basel-Stadt, parliaments adopted motions for a ban on facial recognition, while similar motions were in progress in the cities of Lucerne and Geneva and in the cantons of Zurich and Basel-Landschaft. In a national survey, 78% of parliamentary candidates supported such a ban.

SYRIA

Syrian Arab Republic

All parties to the long-standing conflict and their allies continued to carry out unlawful attacks, killing civilians and destroying vital infrastructure. Türkiye-backed armed groups unlawfully killed four civilians. The government and armed groups denied civilians access to humanitarian aid. The government continued to subject tens of thousands of people to enforced disappearance; the UN General Assembly established an international institution to clarify the fate of missing people and provide reparation to families of victims. The government and armed forces arbitrarily detained individuals for expressing their views. Refugees remained at risk of arrest upon return to Syria. The government continued to prevent residents and internally displaced people in north-west Syria from accessing essential services, violating their economic and social rights. The government violated the right to housing of residents in Aleppo city whose homes were affected by powerful earthquakes on 6 February. The Israeli military violently quelled protests against the installation of turbines in the Golan

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S HUMAN RIGHTS

APRIL 2024

Each year, Amnesty International documents the state of the world's human rights. Our research reveals that, across the world, authorities continue to assault universal freedoms. States and armed groups are breaking and bending the rules of war and racism lies at the heart of some armed conflicts and the responses to them. Economic crises, climate change and environmental degradation have disproportionately affected marginalized communities. Human rights defenders campaigning for the rights of these communities are targeted as part of a wider repression of dissent. The backlash has intensified against the rights of women and girls and LGBTI people. Incitement to hatred and other harmful content posted online against some racialized groups have increased. Meanwhile, advances in artificial intelligence are used to limit freedoms and violate human rights.

This report documents human rights concerns during 2023 in 155 countries, connecting issues at global and regional levels and looking forward to the implications for the future. It calls for action and shows what steps governments and others can take to meet these challenges and improve people's lives across the world. It makes essential reading for government leaders, policymakers, advocates, activists and anyone interested in human rights.

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