

mechanisms to prevent violence against women.

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Despite the lack of official data on child pregnancy for 2020, it remains a low visibility-problem in Uruguay. Girls giving birth under the age of 15 are mostly a consequence of situations of sexual abuse and exploitation. According to the National Committee for the Eradication of Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents, in 2020 there was a 41% increase in reports of commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents.

Difficulties in accessing sexual and reproductive health services increased during COVID-19 confinement measures, especially access to abortion, which is legal in the country but difficult to access due to health professionals' refusal to perform this service on religious grounds and a lack of access to health centres in rural areas.

UZBEKISTAN

Republic of Uzbekistan

Head of state: **Shavkat Mirziyoyev**

Head of government: **Abdulla Aripov**

Renewed efforts to improve the country's image saw the President prioritize a reform agenda. However, freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly remained tightly regulated. Human rights defenders continued to face targeted surveillance. Progress in the eradication of forced labour in the cotton sector was marred by harassment of independent monitors. A significant increase in domestic and gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic was exacerbated by the closure of virtually all crisis centres during lockdown. Consensual sexual relations between men remained a criminal offence. A draft bill was introduced on an independent torture complaints mechanism, although reports of torture and other ill-treatment, including deaths in custody, continued.

BACKGROUND

The President's reform agenda included setting up a National Council on International Ratings to undertake a systematic review of reforms, and a National Human Rights Strategy setting out monitoring mechanisms including on the prevention of torture.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

In March, for the first time since 2003, the authorities granted registration to Huquqiy Tayanch (Legal Support), an independent NGO. However, they continued to reject or obstruct the applications of other independent human rights organizations.

Human rights defenders and journalists, including those in exile, continued to be under secret surveillance and were the target of sophisticated phishing and spyware attacks. The legal framework for such surveillance provided insufficient safeguards against abuse. The security services were able to bypass some security tools that activists use to protect themselves against surveillance and carried out a campaign of malicious emails using fake websites, along with spyware embedded in legitimate software.¹

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

Draft legislation on public meetings, published in August, severely restricted the right to freedom of peaceful assembly. It barred NGOs without official registration from organizing or holding public meetings, required organizers to apply for permission 15 days in advance, limited the duration of any public meeting to two hours during daytime, and proscribed meetings from taking place within 300m of various premises. A public meeting would include flash mobs and single person protests, making it virtually impossible for anyone to exercise their right to freedom of peaceful assembly.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Prosecutor General's Office set up an inter-

agency working group to monitor social media for “fake news” or misleading information on the spread of the virus. Amendments to the Criminal Code at the end of March introduced stricter punishment for the dissemination of false information on the spread of the virus, increasing sentences from five to a maximum of 10 years in prison.

In May, a young blogger from Margilan was briefly detained by police for allegedly not wearing a face mask in public after he had posted a comment on his Facebook account endorsing an article critical of the local authorities’ handling of the pandemic.²

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Significant progress in the eradication of forced labour in the cotton sector was marred by continued harassment of human rights defenders monitoring the implementation of ILO reforms during the cotton harvest. Police in Namangan detained and beat four independent monitors in June as they were recording adolescents working in the cotton fields. Police confiscated cameras, mobile phones and notes, forcibly tested the activists for COVID-19 and placed them under supervised quarantine. In April, the authorities had cited economic hardship caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to put pressure on the Cotton Campaign to endorse lifting the boycott of Uzbekistani cotton.

DISCRIMINATION

Rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people

Consensual sexual relations between men remained a criminal offence despite promises by the authorities to revise the criminal code. A member of the Uzbekistani UN delegation stated in September that non-heterosexual relations were contrary to “traditional” values and that the public was not ready to endorse decriminalization. Programmes on national television stigmatized LGBTI people and declared them a “dangerous foreign influence”.

LGBTI people faced increased discrimination in accessing health care

during the COVID-19 pandemic. LGBTI youth were at particular risk of domestic and gender-based violence during lockdown; they were without access to community resources and support structures since they could not leave their homes and were forced into cohabitation with unsupportive and/or abusive families.

Women’s rights

Domestic and gender-based violence increased significantly during the pandemic and human rights activists said that the problem was exacerbated by the fact that only five out of the 197 national crisis shelters were able to operate during lockdowns and other restrictive measures.

In July, a group of young female activists faced a backlash on social media, including online abuse and threats of violence, when they organized a flash mob action to protest gender-based violence and discrimination following a highly publicized assault on a 17-year-old girl. In August, a programme on national television denounced their protest action as dangerous and criticized them for not respecting “traditional” values.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

In May, the authorities signalled their intention to set up independent mechanisms to investigate complaints of torture; provide effective redress and compensation to victims and their families; and monitor places of detention to prevent torture and other ill-treatment. The announcement followed a Presidential Resolution on additional measures to improve the prevention of torture.

Reports of torture, however, continued. In July, the authorities launched investigations into the deaths in January, June and July of three men in prison and police custody and charged the alleged perpetrators with torture. In September, five police officers were found guilty and sentenced to up to nine years in prison for the torture of Yusuf Abdurakhmanov in January. A forensic investigation found blood that matched Yusuf Abdurakhmanov’s on the inside of a

gas mask. In November Andijan Regional Court sentenced five police officers to 10 years in prison for the torture of Alijon Abdukarimov.

Impunity

In March, in a retrial, a court in Kashkadaria acquitted human rights defender and torture survivor Chuyan Mamatkulov of all charges and quashed his sentence. In October, the Supreme Court granted him financial compensation. Other human rights activists, however, have not been granted the right to challenge their convictions, despite compelling evidence that the charges against them were fabricated and that they were tortured to “confess”.

1. [Targeted surveillance attacks in Uzbekistan: An old threat with new techniques \(Blog, 12 March\)](#)
2. [Blogging in Uzbekistan: welcoming tourism, silencing criticism \(Blog, 25 June\)](#)

VENEZUELA

Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

Head of state and government: **Nicolás Maduro Moros**

The continuing human rights crisis in Venezuela saw further reports of extrajudicial executions, excessive use of force and unlawful killings by the security forces during the year. People expressing criticism of government policies – including political activists, journalists and health workers – were subjected to repressive measures including criminalization, unfair trials and arbitrary detention. There were reports of torture and other ill-treatment and enforced disappearance of those arbitrarily detained. Human rights defenders were stigmatized and faced obstacles in carrying out their work. The humanitarian crisis worsened with widespread shortages of services and high levels of extreme poverty. These and the ongoing undermining of health service infrastructure were exacerbated by the

COVID-19 pandemic. People returning to the country were held in state-run quarantine centres in conditions and for lengths of time that may have constituted arbitrary detention and ill-treatment. The UN Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) on Venezuela established there were reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity have been committed in Venezuela since 2014 and that President Maduro and senior military and ministerial figures ordered or contributed to the crimes documented in its report.

EXTRAJUDICIAL EXECUTIONS

Reports of extrajudicial executions by the Special Action Forces of the Bolivarian National Police (FAES) and the Criminal Investigative Police (CICPC) continued. According to the OHCHR at least 2,000 people were reportedly killed in the country in the context of security operations between 1 January and September. As of June, the Zulia state Human Rights Committee had recorded 377 deaths, allegedly resulting from violence by these police forces in Zulia state. Those targeted were primarily young men living in low-income neighbourhoods who were arbitrarily detained in circumstances which the authorities claimed involved clashes with police.

ARBITRARY DETENTION

Arbitrary detentions continued to be used as part of the policy of repression targeting dissidents.

The Venezuelan human rights organization Penal Forum reported that, as of October, there had been 413 arbitrary, politically motivated arrests; these increased following the declaration of a state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March.

In addition to political activists, 12 health workers who made critical public statements about the government's response to the pandemic faced short-term detention and subsequent restrictions.

The COVID-19 pandemic was used to restrict notification of arrests, obliging