

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S HUMAN RIGHTS

APRIL 2024



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Amnesty International is impartial. We take no position on issues of sovereignty, territorial disputes or international political or legal arrangements that might be adopted to implement the right to self-determination. This report is organized according to the countries we monitored during the year. In general, they are independent states that are accountable for the human rights situation on their territory.

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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 – 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 of 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

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

Amnesty International sounds alarm on a watershed moment for international law amid flagrant rule-breaking by governments and corporate actors

- Powerful governments cast humanity into an era devoid of effective international rule of law, with civilians in conflicts paying the highest price
- Rapidly changing artificial intelligence is left to create fertile ground for racism, discrimination and division in landmark year for public elections
- Standing against these abuses, people the world over mobilized in unprecedented numbers, demanding human rights protection and respect for our common humanity

The world is reaping a harvest of terrifying consequences from escalating conflict and the near breakdown of international law, said Amnesty International as it launched its annual The State of the World's Human Rights report today, delivering an assessment of human rights in 155 countries.

Amnesty International also warned that the breakdown of the rule of law is likely to accelerate with rapid advancement in artificial intelligence (AI) which, coupled with the dominance of Big Tech, risks a “supercharging” of human rights violations if regulation continues to lag behind advances.

“Amnesty International’s report paints a dismal picture of alarming human rights repression and prolific international rule-breaking, all in the midst of deepening global inequality, superpowers vying for supremacy and an escalating climate crisis,” said Amnesty International’s Secretary General, Agnès Callamard.

“Israel’s flagrant disregard for international law is compounded by the failures of its allies to stop the indescribable civilian bloodshed meted out in Gaza. Many of those allies were the very architects of that post-World War Two system of law. Alongside Russia’s ongoing aggression against Ukraine, the growing number of armed conflicts, and massive human rights violations witnessed, for example, in Sudan, Ethiopia and Myanmar – the global rule-based order is at risk of decimation.”

Lawlessness, discrimination and impunity in conflicts and elsewhere have been enabled by unchecked use of new and familiar technologies which are now routinely weaponized by military, political and corporate actors. Big Tech’s platforms have stoked conflict. Spyware and mass surveillance tools are used to encroach on fundamental rights and freedoms, while governments are deploying automated tools targeting the most marginalized groups in society.

“In an increasingly precarious world, unregulated proliferation and deployment of technologies such as generative AI, facial recognition and spyware are poised to be a pernicious foe – scaling up and supercharging violations of international law and human rights to exceptional levels,” said Agnès Callamard.

“During a landmark year of elections and in the face of the increasingly powerful anti-regulation lobby driven and financed by Big Tech actors, these rogue and unregulated technological advances pose an enormous threat to us all. They can be weaponized to discriminate, disinform and divide.”

CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT PAY ULTIMATE PRICE AS STATES FLOUT INTERNATIONAL LAW

Amnesty International’s report presents a stark assessment of the betrayal of human rights principles by today’s leaders and institutions. In the face of multiplying conflicts, the actions of many powerful states have further damaged the credibility of multilateralism and undermined the global rules-based order first established in 1945.

In a conflict that defined 2023 and shows no sign of abating, evidence of war crimes continues to mount as the Israeli government makes a mockery of international law in Gaza. Following the horrific attacks by Hamas and other armed groups on 7 October, Israeli authorities responded with unrelenting air strikes on populated civilian areas often wiping out entire families, forcibly displacing nearly 1.9 million Palestinians and restricting the access of desperately needed humanitarian aid despite growing famine in Gaza.

The report points to the USA’s brazen use of its veto to paralyse the UN Security Council for months on a much-needed resolution for a ceasefire, as it continues to arm Israel with munitions that have been used to commit what likely amounts to war crimes. It also highlights the grotesque double standards of European countries such as the UK and Germany, given their well-founded protestations about war crimes by Russia and Hamas, while they simultaneously bolster the actions of Israeli and US authorities in this conflict.

“The confounding failure of the international community to protect thousands of civilians – a horrifically high percentage of them children – from being killed in the occupied Gaza Strip makes patently clear that the very institutions set up to protect civilians and uphold human rights are no longer fit for purpose. What we saw in 2023 confirms that many powerful states are abandoning the founding values of humanity and universality enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” said Agnès Callamard.

The report also documents flagrant rule-breaking by Russian forces during their continued full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It highlights indiscriminate attacks on densely populated civilian areas, as well as energy and grain export infrastructure; and the use of torture or other ill-treatment against prisoners of war. This is in addition to vast environmental contamination through acts including the apparently deliberate destruction of the Kakhovka dam which is widely believed to have been committed by Russian forces.

Myanmar’s military and associated militias also conducted attacks against civilians resulting in over 1,000 civilian deaths in 2023 alone. Neither government has responded to reports of glaring violations, let alone committed to investigating them. Both have received financial and military support from China.

In Sudan, both warring parties, the Sudan Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, have demonstrated little concern for international humanitarian law as they carried out targeted and indiscriminate attacks that have killed and injured civilians, and launched explosive weapons from densely populated neighbourhoods killing 12,000 people in 2023. This has triggered the largest displacement crisis in the world with more than 8 million people forced to flee. With no end to the conflict in sight, the hunger crisis that has gripped Sudan for months is now dangerously close to turning into famine.

TECH WIELDED TO STOKE HATE, DIVISION AND DISCRIMINATION POSES THREAT IN LANDMARK YEAR OF ELECTIONS

Amnesty International found that political actors in many parts of the world are ramping up their attacks on women, LGBTI people and marginalized communities who have historically been scapegoated for political or electoral gains. New and existing technologies have increasingly been weaponized to aid and abet these repressive political forces to spread disinformation, pit communities against each other and attack minorities.

The report also points to the expansive use of existing technologies to entrench discriminatory policies. States including Argentina, Brazil, India and the UK have increasingly turned to facial recognition technologies to police public protests and sporting events and discriminate against marginalized communities – particularly migrants and refugees. For example, in response to legal action by Amnesty International, the New York Police Department revealed in 2023 how it used the technology to subject Black Lives Matter protests in the city to surveillance.

The nefarious use of facial recognition was no more pervasive than in the West Bank of the Occupied Palestinian Territories where it was used by Israel to reinforce restrictions on freedom of movement and help maintain the system of apartheid.

In Serbia, the introduction of a semi-automated social welfare system resulted in thousands of people losing access to vital social assistance. This particularly affected Roma communities and people with disabilities, demonstrating how unchecked automation can exacerbate inequality.

With millions fleeing conflicts around the world, the report notes how abusive technologies were relied upon for migration governance and border enforcement, including through use of digital alternatives to detention, border externalization technologies, data software, biometrics and algorithmic decision-making systems. The proliferation of these technologies perpetuates and reinforces discrimination, racism, and disproportionate and unlawful surveillance against racialized people.

Meanwhile, spyware has remained largely unregulated, despite the long-term evidence of the human rights violations it drives, with activists-in-exile, journalists and human rights defenders usually among those targeted. In 2023, Amnesty International uncovered the use of Pegasus spyware against journalists and civil society activists in countries including Armenia, the Dominican Republic, India and Serbia, while EU-based and regulated spyware was freely sold to states the world over.

Over the past year the rapid trajectory of generative AI, has transformed the scale of the threat posed by the gamut of technologies already in existence – from spyware to state automation and social media’s run-away algorithms.

In the face of rapacious advancements, regulation has largely remained stagnant. However, in a sign that European policymakers are beginning to act, a landmark EU-wide Digital Services Act came into force in February 2024. While imperfect and incomplete, it has nevertheless triggered a much-needed global debate on AI regulation.

“There is a vast chasm between the risks posed by the unchecked advancement of technologies, and where we need to be in terms of regulation and protection. It’s our future foretold and will only worsen unless the rampant proliferation of unregulated technology is curtailed,” said Agnès Callamard.

Amnesty International exposed how Facebook’s algorithms contributed to ethnic violence in Ethiopia in the context of armed conflict. This is a prime example of how technology is weaponized to pit communities against each other, particularly in times of instability.

The human rights organization forecasts that these problems will escalate in a landmark election year, with the surveillance-based business model underpinning major social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube acting as a catalyst for human rights violations in the context of elections.

“We’ve seen how hate, discrimination and disinformation are amplified and spread by social media algorithms optimized to maximize ‘engagement’ above all else. They create an endless and dangerous feedback loop, particularly at times of heightened political sensitivity. Tools can generate synthetic images, audio and video in seconds, as well as target specific audience groups at scale, but electoral regulation has yet to catch up with this threat. To date we’ve seen too much talk with too little action,” said Agnès Callamard.

In November, the US presidential election will take place in the face of increasing discrimination, harassment and abuse on social media platforms towards marginalized communities including LGBTI people. Threatening and intimidating anti-abortion content has also become rife.

Almost a billion people will vote in India’s election this year against a backdrop of attacks on peaceful protesters and systematic discrimination against religious minorities. In 2023 Amnesty International revealed that invasive spyware had been used to target prominent Indian journalists, and more broadly tech platforms have become political battlefields.

“Politicians have long used manipulation of ‘us vs. them’ narratives to win votes and outmanoeuvre legitimate questions about economic and security fears. We’ve seen how unregulated technologies, such as facial recognition, have been used to entrench discrimination. Coupled with this, Big Tech’s surveillance business model is pouring fuel on this fire of hate, enabling those with malintent to hound, dehumanize and amplify dangerous narratives to consolidate power or polling. It’s a chilling spectre of what’s to come as technological advances rapaciously outpace accountability,” said Agnès Callamard.

UNPRECEDENTED GLOBAL MOBILIZATION

“We’ve seen the actions of powerful state and non-state actors cast us deeper into the chaos of a world without effective rules, where ruthless profit-making from revolutionary technologies without effective governance has become the norm. But where many governments have failed to abide by international law, we have also seen others calling on international institutions to implement the rule of law. And where leaders the world over have failed to stand up for human rights, we have seen people galvanized to march, protest and petition for a more hopeful future,” said Agnès Callamard.

The Israel-Hamas conflict sparked hundreds of protests worldwide. People demanded a ceasefire to end the staggering suffering of Palestinians in Gaza, as well as the release of all hostages taken by Hamas and other armed groups, long before many governments did. Elsewhere, people took to the streets of the USA, El Salvador and Poland to demand the right to abortion as the backlash against gender justice took hold. Across the globe thousands joined youth-led movement Fridays For Future to call for the fair and fast phase-out of fossil fuels.

Tireless campaigning also led to a number of significant human rights wins in 2023. Following advocacy by Taiwan’s #MeToo movement and other civil society organizations to end online sexual violence, the government passed an amendment to Taiwan’s “Sexual Assault Crime Prevention Act”.

Despite falling short of what was needed, COP28 agreed to “transition away” from fossil fuels marking the first time that fossil fuels had been mentioned in a COP decision. In the wake of years of campaigning, four human rights defenders in the Buyukada case – Taner Kılıç, İdil Eser, Özlem Dalkıran and Günel Kurşun, who were convicted in July 2020 on baseless charges – were finally acquitted in Turkey.

In one of many examples, Afghan education activist Matiullah Wesa was released last October after months of campaigning. He spent nearly seven months in prison for promoting girls’ right to education and criticizing the Taliban’s policy banning girls from seeking secondary education.

“The right to protest is critical to shining a light on abuses and on leaders’ responsibilities. People have made it abundantly clear that they want human rights; the onus is on governments to show that they are listening,” said Agnès Callamard.

“Given the grim global state-of-play, urgent measures are required to revitalize and renew the international institutions intended to safeguard humanity. Steps must be taken to reform the UN Security Council so that permanent members cannot wield their veto power unchecked to prevent the protection of civilians and bolster their geopolitical alliances. Governments must also take robust legislative and regulatory steps to address the risks and harms caused by AI technologies and reign in Big Tech.”

ENDS

NOTES TO EDITOR

- Amnesty International's *The State of the World's Human Rights* report contains 155 country entries, five regional overviews and a global analysis, as well as a preface by its Secretary General, Agnès Callamard, giving an overview of the state of human rights in her own words.
- The global analysis focuses on four issues that highlight at a global level some of the many trends documented in the rest of the report: 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 AI. They represent, from Amnesty International's perspective, critical challenges for human rights across the world in 2024 and beyond.

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 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 in 2023, 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 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 Mexico, same-sex marriage was authorized in all 32 states. 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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 5. “International Justice Day: Harnessing the Rome Statute and strengthening the system of international justice”, 17 July
 6. An Unstoppable Movement: A Global Call to Recognize and Protect Those Who Defend the Right to Abortion, 24 November
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ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL OVERVIEW

There were modest gains for the rights of women and LGBTI people in several countries; a new law criminalizing torture and enforced disappearance was adopted in Thailand; and the mandatory death penalty was abolished in Malaysia. Yet, overall, the outlook for human rights in the Asia-Pacific region remained bleak.

Escalating armed conflict in Myanmar resulted in yet more civilian deaths and displacement. In Afghanistan, the Taliban intensified their repression especially against women and girls. A growing intolerance of dissent was evident throughout much of the region as restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association tightened in multiple countries and territories. Critics of government policies and actions, including human rights defenders, political activists and journalists, were arbitrarily arrested and detained; protests against injustice were often met with unlawful, sometimes lethal, force.

Long-standing patterns of discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities and so-called lower castes, women and girls, LGBTI people and Indigenous Peoples persisted. People belonging to these and other marginalized groups were particularly hard hit in countries suffering economic crises. They were also the first to suffer the often-deadly consequence of climate-change induced weather events, yet governments across the region failed to take effective action to curb carbon emissions or to put in place effective protection and adaptation measures.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The right to freedom of expression remained under threat as many governments intensified crackdowns on media, human rights defenders, opposition parties, government critics and others.

Several countries maintained or intensified already extreme restrictions. In Afghanistan, journalists and other media workers were among those subjected to harassment and arbitrary detention, and more media outlets were shut down or were forced to close their doors. In Myanmar, journalists were among those sentenced to long terms of imprisonment in unfair trials. In North Korea, there was no let-up in the government's total control over civic space with harsh penalties imposed on anyone who criticized the government or engaged in "reactionary" ideology.

Elsewhere, government efforts to silence critical voices took multiple forms. New laws or regulations restricting the rights to freedom of expression came into force in Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea and Singapore. The new government in Fiji repealed a law limiting media freedoms, but other restrictive legislation remained.

In Cambodia, the licence of one of the few remaining independent media outlets was revoked. The Indian government weaponized the central financial and investigation agencies to carry out raids on and suspend the licences of media outlets and human rights organizations. Bhutan, where civil servants are barred from sharing information of public interest with the media, slipped down global press freedom rankings.

Censorship and surveillance technologies were increasingly used to suppress dissent. In China, new guidelines placed further restrictions on social media users, while social media companies required certain users to disclose their identity, raising concerns about the right to privacy. In Hong Kong, the draconian National Security Law and colonial-era sedition law were used to censor books, songs, social media and other on- and offline content. In Viet Nam, Amnesty International found that state agents, or persons acting on their behalf, were likely behind a campaign targeting dozens of social media accounts using Predator spyware, while the Thai government failed to address concerns about its use of Pegasus spyware against human rights defenders, politicians and civil society activists.

Judicial harassment of those who shared information or expressed views critical of or deemed sensitive by governments was also commonplace. Journalists and activists in Viet Nam were prosecuted and imprisoned for “disseminating propaganda against the state”. In the Maldives, journalists were arrested for reporting on protests and other events. In Malaysia, the government not only failed to act on pledges to repeal laws restricting the rights to freedom of expression, but continued to use them to investigate film makers and book editors among others. In Thailand, authorities persisted in applying laws restricting online communication to prosecute critics, while government critics in the Philippines continued to face spurious charges. Peaceful calls for Papuan independence remained an imprisonable offence in Indonesia. In Laos, long-standing patterns of intimidation, arbitrary detention as well as unlawful killing, and enforced disappearance against human rights defenders continued. Likewise in Pakistan, journalists, human rights defenders and critics of the government and military establishment were among those subjected to arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance.

There were signs that transnational repression of dissent was becoming entrenched. Chinese and Hong Kong authorities pursued activists, including nationals who had fled abroad, issuing arrest warrants, offering financial rewards and pressuring other countries to repatriate them. Two human rights defenders returned from Laos were subsequently detained in China. The Viet Nam authorities were implicated in the abduction from Thailand of a prominent YouTuber, while a Laotian human rights defender was shot dead in Thailand.

Governments must repeal all laws and regulations that criminalize or otherwise restrict legitimate expression, end all unjustified investigations or prosecutions related to the legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression, and respect media freedoms.

FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

With the exception of Fiji, where there were signs of greater tolerance, governments across the region sought to further curtail the right to peaceful assembly.

In Thailand criminal charges had been brought against nearly 2,000 people by the end of the year in connection with their participation in protests for political and social reform which began in 2020. The number of people detained for taking part in events to commemorate victims of an apartment block fire in Urumqi, China, in 2022 and associated protests against Covid-19 restrictions will probably never be known, but there were reports of ongoing harassment of participants and a Uyghur student was sentenced

to three years' imprisonment for posting a video of the protests on social media. In Malaysia and Mongolia, authorities continued to use repressive laws to restrict the right to peaceful protest, while in South Korea, the increasingly hard line against "illegal" protests set the scene for extortionate claims for damages by a state-owned company against disability rights campaigners. In Myanmar, dozens of people were arrested for wearing flowers to mark the birthday of the imprisoned former State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi.

Unlawful use of force leading to injuries and sometimes deaths remained common. In Afghanistan, the Taliban reportedly used firearms, water cannons and stun guns to disperse demonstrations including protests in support of women's rights, among others. Authorities in both Pakistan and Sri Lanka sought to ban protests and frequently resorted to excessive and other unlawful force against protesters – deaths and many injuries resulted in both countries. In Bangladesh, police used rubber bullets, live rounds and tear gas against opposition-led protests resulting in at least one death. Thousands of people were arrested. Security forces also used unlawful force against protesters in Indonesia, the Maldives and Nepal.

Restrictions on the rights to freedom of association also deepened in several countries. In Cambodia, the only opposition party was disqualified from taking part in elections and a leading opposition politician sentenced to 27 years' imprisonment. In the Philippines, human rights and humanitarian organizations were among those accused of links to banned communist groups or "red-tagged", leaving their members vulnerable to trumped-up charges, unlawful killing and other human rights violations. In South Korea, trade unions faced an increasingly hostile environment and dozens of labour activists were placed under criminal investigation.

Governments must respect and facilitate the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. The work of human rights defenders must be respected and protected and a safe and enabling environment for their work ensured.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND DETENTIONS

Human rights defenders, political and environmental activists and others were arbitrarily arrested and detained for challenging government policies and actions or on the basis of their ethnic, religious or other identity.

In China, arbitrary detention and unfair trials of Uyghurs and people from other predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region continued. In Myanmar, more than 20,000 people remained in detention for opposing the 2021 military coup and grossly unfair trials continued.

In Pakistan, the authorities used the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance and the vaguely worded Anti-Terrorism Act to arbitrarily detain over 4,000 people involved in protests following the arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan in May. Another 103 civilians, including political leaders and activists, were put on trial in military courts. Although the courts in India granted bail or quashed detention orders of several arbitrarily detained journalists in Jammu and Kashmir, human rights defenders there and elsewhere in the country continued to be held without trial, often for years.

In Mongolia, inadequate procedural guarantees resulted in high numbers of arrests without warrants.

Governments must end all arbitrary arrests and detention of government critics and others and immediately release anyone detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, association or other human rights.

IMPUNITY AND THE RIGHT TO JUSTICE

Impunity remained widespread and victims were routinely denied their rights to justice, truth and reparation.

Although the decision by the International Criminal Court to resume investigations in the Philippines offered some hope for families of the countless victims of unlawful killings during the ongoing “war on drugs”, accountability for serious human rights violations there remained almost completely elusive. In Thailand, impunity prevailed for unlawful killings by state security forces. The governments of Sri Lanka and Nepal again failed to make significant progress towards delivering justice, truth and reparations to the tens of thousands of victims of crimes under international law and other grave human rights violations during the respective internal armed conflicts.

Governments must address impunity by undertaking thorough, independent, impartial, investigations into crimes under international law and other serious human rights abuses, and by bringing suspected perpetrators to justice in fair trials. Full cooperation should be extended to international investigations and justice processes and reparations provided for historical human rights abuses.

VIOLATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

Violations of international humanitarian law persisted in Myanmar, where indiscriminate and targeted air and ground attacks by the military and associated militias spread across the country resulting in over 1,000 civilian deaths. There were also reports of attacks by armed opposition groups on civilians linked to Myanmar’s military authorities. In the context of ongoing armed resistance to the Taliban in Afghanistan’s Panjshir province, there was new evidence of enforced collective punishments against the civilian population and extrajudicial executions of captured fighters from the National Resistance Front, while attacks by armed groups, primarily the Islamic State of Khorasan Province, resulted in thousands of casualties.

All parties to armed conflicts must abide by international humanitarian law, including by ending indiscriminate or direct attacks against civilians or civilian infrastructure.

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Several countries remained mired in serious economic crises. Skyrocketing inflation in Laos and Pakistan and resulting cost of living hikes impacted the most vulnerable to marginalization. In Sri Lanka, where over a quarter of the population risked falling below the poverty line, access to food, healthcare and other basic needs became a daily challenge, particularly for daily wage earners and Malaiyaha Tamils. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan deepened, leading to fears of a further increase in the already high

numbers of people reliant on humanitarian aid – yet the humanitarian response plan remained woefully underfunded.

In Papua New Guinea, chronic under-resourcing of the health system meant that much of the population could not access adequate healthcare. Food insecurity persisted in North Korea and healthcare including essential medicines and vaccines were often unavailable.

Forced evictions and house demolitions left thousands of people homeless and destitute or at risk thereof. In Cambodia, the process of forcibly evicting 10,000 families from the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Angkor continued. Close to 300,000 people were made homeless in India following the demolition of informal settlements in Delhi ahead of the G20 Summit, and demolitions of largely Muslim homes, businesses and places of worship continued in punishment for communal violence. In Indonesia, authorities responded with excessive force to communities protesting against planned evictions and infrastructure development projects, while in Laos the construction of a dam threatened to displace thousands of villagers, without adequate arrangements for compensation.

Cultural and linguistic rights and the right to education for ethnic minorities across China, were undermined by government policies including assimilationist policies targeting Tibetan and Uyghur children.

Governments should ensure that economic, social and cultural rights are protected and that policies do not compound the violations of rights to food, health, and livelihood.

CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY

Corporate accountability for human rights abuses too often remained elusive. However, Amnesty International's research on Myanmar contributed to positive developments, with several companies linked to the supply of aviation fuel that was used by the Myanmar military in air strikes against civilians ceasing their involvement. Also, the EU, the UK, the USA and other countries passed targeted sanctions against some of these companies.

Governments must put in place legislation that requires corporate actors to conduct human rights due diligence to ensure that their operations and those of their partners do not cause or contribute to human rights abuses, and that any harm resulting from their operations is remedied.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF

Freedom of religion or belief remained under threat, especially in South Asia. In India, hundreds of incidents of violence and intimidation of Muslims were recorded. Violence against religious minorities was also widespread in Pakistan, where Ahmadi grave sites were desecrated, and allegations of blasphemy used to target minorities including to justify attacks against over 20 churches in a single day. In Afghanistan, religious minorities including Shia's and Hazara Shia's, Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, Ahmadiyya and Ismailis faced extreme discrimination under the Taliban, who also ensured formal religious teaching was exclusively based on the Sunni sect of Islam.

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

WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' RIGHTS

Legal protections against sexual violence were strengthened in Japan where the definition of rape under criminal law was extended to include non-consensual sex. In Fiji, legal obstacles to participation in elections for married women were removed.

But the reality for many women and girls in the region remained one of systemic discrimination and violence.

High numbers of incidents of harassment and violence including rape and other sexual violence, continued to be reported particularly in South Asia, and accountability was rare. In India, there was particular concern about the high number of incidents of sexual violence against Dalits, Adivasi and Kuki women by members of dominant castes.

Discrimination took many forms. In Afghanistan, the ever more extreme restrictions on women's and girls' rights and the scale of human rights violations against them reached the level of the crime against humanity of gender persecution. In Nepal, women continued to be denied equal citizenship rights. In Bhutan, Fiji, Japan and elsewhere women remained significantly under-represented in public office and the work force.

Governments must accelerate efforts to uphold and promote women's and girls' rights, end gender and intersectional discrimination against women and girls and prevent and prosecute gender-based violence.

LGBTI PEOPLE'S RIGHTS

There was both progress in and setbacks to LGBTI rights. In Taiwan, authorities recognized the right of most transnational same-sex couples to marry and on 21 December, Thai lawmakers began a process of legalizing same-sex marriages. Court rulings in Hong Kong, Nepal and South Korea gave greater recognition to the rights of same-sex couples and/or transgender people. However, in South Korea the Constitutional Court upheld the criminalization of consensual same-sex sexual relations within the Korean military. In addition, governments typically reacted by appealing against rights-affirming judgments and dragging their feet on implementation.

The precarious position of LGBTI individuals and groups was also illustrated in China, where a prominent LGBTI organization was forced to close in the face of the government's ongoing anti-LGBTI campaign. In Pakistan, political and Islamist groups led a disinformation campaign that put existing legal protections for transgender (Khawaja Sara) people at risk and resulted in increased violence against and harassment of transgender and gender diverse people. In India, the Supreme Court refused to grant legal recognition to same-sex marriage. In Malaysia, books and other materials considered to promote LGBTI lifestyles were banned and in Mongolia a pro-LGBTI march was banned.

Governments should repeal laws and policies that discriminate against LGBTI people, including by decriminalizing consensual same-sex sexual relations, and should recognize same-sex marriage, promote and protect LGBTI people's rights and enable them to live in safety and dignity.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' RIGHTS AND ETHNIC AND CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination against Indigenous Peoples and on the basis of ethnicity and caste remained widespread. In countries including Cambodia, Indonesia and Malaysia, Indigenous Peoples' rights were ignored as commercial exploitation of their lands threatened their lives and livelihoods. Consultations with affected communities, where they occurred, were often superficial and Indigenous Peoples' activists were vulnerable to human rights abuses. In the Philippines, two Indigenous environmental protection activists were forcibly disappeared and Indigenous Peoples' rights leaders designated as terrorists.

An historic opportunity to progress the rights of First Nations People in Australia was lost with the rejection in a national referendum of a proposal to establish an Indigenous "Voice" that would have enabled them to make direct representations to parliament. In New Zealand, Māori people continued to experience discrimination and marginalization including in the criminal justice system where they continued to be significantly over-represented. In India, caste-based discrimination continued unabated.

Governments must ensure effective access to justice to victims of ethnic and caste-based discrimination, end impunity for human rights abuses against Dalits, Indigenous Peoples and other at-risk groups, and prioritize policies and programmes to eliminate structural discrimination including in the criminal justice system.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

The criminalization of torture and enforced disappearances in Thailand underscored the power of concerted campaigning by victims and human rights defenders, but there remained much to be done there and elsewhere to prevent torture and other forms of ill-treatment.

Multiple instances of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees were reported across the region, and deaths in custody were all too common. At least 94 detainees died in custody during the year in Bangladesh and at least 13 in Malaysia. The Nepali authorities failed to hold anyone accountable for the many credible allegations of torture and other ill-treatment. In Afghanistan, torture of detainees was reportedly widespread and public corporal punishment amounting to torture or other ill-treatment was used. The Indonesian military was responsible for the arbitrary detention, torture and deaths in custody of Indigenous Papuan civilians, including children.

Governments must prohibit and criminalize torture and other acts of ill-treatment and take effective measures to protect and prevent abuse of marginalized and at-risk groups. Where they occur, states must investigate allegations, hold those responsible to account and provide victims with timely remedy.

RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

Devastating floods, soaring temperatures and deadly typhoons highlighted the vulnerability of the region to events induced by climate change. Yet measures to reduce carbon emissions and for preparedness and adaptation remained largely inadequate. As

ever, the poorest and most marginalized suffered the gravest consequences for these failures.

The high death toll among ethnic Rohingya from a cyclone that hit Myanmar in May was largely attributable to the appalling conditions in which they have lived since being forcibly displaced in 2012. In India, almost 200 deaths were recorded in floods in the Himalayan region and heatwaves in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states. Pakistan continued to experience searing climate change-induced heatwaves that severely impacted health, particularly of those living in poverty and informal sector workers.

Mitigation efforts, starting with emissions targets set by many states, including the biggest emitters, remained insufficient to keep the increase in average global temperatures below 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Policies and actions were often inconsistent with meeting targets to which states had committed. For example, Taiwan adopted legislation requiring the government to reduce emissions, but there was no timeline for phasing out fossil fuels and oil exploration continued.

There was little sign of reducing reliance on coal in the region's energy systems. On the contrary, new coal-fired plants and coal mining projects continued to be authorized by governments in Australia, China, Indonesia and South Korea, often in the face of strong domestic opposition. Japan was the only industrialized country in the world not to have committed to phasing out the use of coal in electricity production.

States repeatedly ignored the impact of extractive industries on the environment and on Indigenous Peoples and other affected communities. In Mongolia for example, there was still insufficient action to address the impact of mining operations in the Gobi region on the health and livelihoods of herder communities. In Papua New Guinea, the government issued a licence to reopen a gold mining operation previously associated with serious human rights abuses and environmental damage, despite these not being adequately addressed by the company involved.

Industrialized and other high-emitting countries in the region must take the lead in climate mitigation, including by stopping the expansion of fossil fuel production and subsidies, and ensure that their climate policies are consistent with keeping global warming within 1.5°C. Governments must increase investment in disaster preparedness and adaptation and prioritize the protection of marginalized and other groups disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis.

REFUGEES' AND MIGRANTS' RIGHTS AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The indefinite detention of refugees and asylum seekers was ruled unconstitutional by courts in both Australia and South Korea, but protections for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants remained inadequate across the region and their human rights were widely disregarded.

Many refugees and migrants were arbitrarily and indefinitely detained, including in squalid immigration detention centres, or were denied adequate housing and basic services and lacked freedom of movement.

The Malaysian authorities failed to investigate the deaths of 150 people, including women and children, in immigration detention centres in 2022 and, in the meantime, concerns about conditions in the centres persisted. In Bangladesh, a fire in one camp and a cyclone rendered thousands of Rohingya refugees homeless yet again. In Thailand, a new mechanism for screening refugees and asylum seekers was established, but their indefinite detention continued, and poor conditions resulted in the deaths of two Uyghur men. A new immigration law in Japan sanctioned the continuation of indefinite detention of refugees and asylum seekers, while amendments to Taiwan's immigration law failed to include protections against refoulement.

There was serious concern about the fate of hundreds of North Koreans forcibly repatriated by the Chinese government despite warnings that they would likely face severe punishment. Following the Pakistan government's October announcement that unregistered Afghan refugees must leave the country within a month, over 490,000 people were forcibly returned to Afghanistan which many had fled for fear of persecution by the Taliban. Malaysia also violated the principle of non-refoulement by forcibly returning refugees to Myanmar where they faced serious human rights violations.

Government responses to human trafficking in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand remained inadequate, where foreign workers were recruited by deceptive means and forced, often under threat of violence, to work in cyber scams and illegal gambling operations.

Governments must cease detaining asylum seekers on the basis of their immigration status and allow them to seek international protection. In no circumstances should anyone be forcibly returned to a place where they could face persecution or other human rights violations. Protections against human trafficking should be strengthened and survivors provided with legal and other support including for facilitation of repatriation where safe to do so.

DEATH PENALTY

In a positive move, the government of Malaysia repealed the mandatory death penalty for all offences and abolished the death penalty entirely for seven offences. However, the death penalty continued to be used extensively throughout the region, frequently in violation of international law and standards. In both China and Viet Nam, executions were reported but figures on the use of the death penalty remained classified as state secrets. In Afghanistan, death sentences were reported to have been imposed, including by methods such as stoning, found by UN bodies to amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In Singapore, a woman was among those executed for drugs related offences, while anti-death penalty activists and lawyers were subjected to harassment.

Governments that still retain the death penalty must take urgent steps to abolish it.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

The criminalization of children continued to be of concern in several countries. In both Australia and New Zealand, children as young as 10 years old could still be detained and youth detention facilities in both were also found to endanger children. In Thailand,

nearly 300 children were among those criminally charged for their participation in the largely peaceful protests over recent years. They included a young man who was sentenced to one year's prison sentence, suspended for two years, for participating in a mock fashion show in 2020 – when he was 16 years old – satirizing the monarch. In North Korea, reports of the widespread use of forced labour including by children continued.

Governments must never arrest or detain children for exercising their rights, including to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression. Governments should raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14 years or above and must ensure children in conflict with the law are treated in accordance with the principles of child justice, including by strictly limiting the use of detention.

NEPAL

FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF NEPAL

Security forces continued to use unnecessary and excessive force to disperse and detain protesters, resulting in four deaths. Authorities banned TikTok and carried out arrests to limit freedom of expression. The government failed to deliver justice, truth and reparations to victims of the 1996-2006 conflict. Torture and other ill-treatment by security forces was reported and authorities failed to carry out credible and independent investigations into deaths in custody. Gender-based discrimination continued in law and practice. The marriage of an LGBTI couple was registered for the first time. Migrant workers were subjected to abusive and illegal recruitment practices.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSEMBLY

Security forces continued to detain activists and individuals criticizing the government and ruling party politicians, and frequently resorted to unlawful force against protesters.

In February, five protesters demanding justice for sexual violence cases were detained by police. In March, Padam Limbu died after being hit during a baton charge by police at a protest by Indigenous Peoples in Morang district. The government later declared him “a martyr”, pledging relief support to his family.

The authorities continued to crack down on protests by victims of loan sharks, mostly low-income farmers who gathered in the capital, Kathmandu, calling for justice for financial crimes. In April, at least 40 protesters were injured by police using batons and water cannons and at least 20 were detained. Days later, the Home Minister apologized for the excessive use of force by police.

In May, police detained and ill-treated two journalists in Kanchanpur district who had been reporting on a clash involving police. Following condemnation by the journalists’ federation, the district police chief committed to punish the officers responsible.

In June, police detained at least 16 activists in Kathmandu protesting against corruption related to government officials allegedly collecting money from hundreds of Nepali nationals with the promise of Bhutanese refugee status and resettlement in high income countries.

In August, police used unnecessary force against Indigenous Peoples protesters, many of whom were detained and assaulted. The Prime Minister announced that those responsible would be punished but no charges were filed by the end of the year.

In November, the government banned the TikTok app to “protect social harmony and family unity”.

In December, one protester was shot dead in Bara district and two protesters died due to excessive force by police in Lalitpur district.

RIGHT TO TRUTH, JUSTICE AND REPARATION

The government again failed to make significant progress towards delivering truth, justice and reparations to the tens of thousands of victims of crimes under international law and other grave human rights violations committed by both sides during the 1996-2006 conflict. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons, which had respectively collected more than 60,000 and 3,000 complaints from victims, failed to resolve a single case in 2023. In March, the government presented to parliament a Bill for the Amendment of the Investigation of Enforced Disappeared Persons, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act (2014) without adequately consulting conflict victims. The Bill failed to comply with a 2015 Supreme Court ruling to bring it in line with domestic and international human rights standards and appeared to shield alleged perpetrators from prosecution for some crimes under international law.¹ At the end of the year, the Bill remained pending at the lower house.

Amid widespread concerns about government misuse of amnesty provisions to arbitrarily release ruling party affiliates, in November the Supreme Court overturned a Presidential amnesty to a man convicted of murder, ruling the necessity of consent by victims' families.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Reports continued of torture and other ill-treatment of pretrial detainees with impunity. By the end of the year, there were no convictions under the 2017 Criminal Code, which criminalized the practice. In addition, the authorities failed to investigate and publicize reports of investigations into past custodial deaths alleged to have resulted from torture.

In January, three women were beaten by government forest guards for entering a forest to collect grass in Bara district; police refused to lodge complaints against the guards. In July, human rights defender Manohar Kumar Pokharel was assaulted at the District Police Office in Saptari district when visiting a detainee. In August, two prisoners died from alleged torture by police officers guarding them in Sankhuwasabha prison. The Sankhuwasabha District Court remanded seven police officers and eight prisoners in the prison while they were on trial for offences relating to the two prisoners' deaths.

DISCRIMINATION

Gender-based discrimination continued in law and practice. In May, the President authenticated the Nepal Citizenship (First Amendment) Bill which denied women equal citizenship rights. In a positive move for Muslim women, in September, the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional the practice of "triple talaq", Islamic instant divorce.

In June, the Supreme Court issued an interim order to the government to register same-sex marriages with “temporary documentation,” pending its final verdict. However, same-sex couples continued to face barriers in practice as lower courts refused to register marriages, citing a lack of enabling legislation. In November authorities in Lamjung district registered a marriage between Nepalis of the same legal gender for the first time.

Despite provisions in law and policy to address discrimination based on caste, numerous incidents of discrimination against members of the Dalit community were reported, including by elected officials, with impunity. In December the West Rukum District Court convicted 26 people for the killing of six men because of the relationship of one of them with a girl from a dominant caste.²

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Hundreds of families living in informal settlements across the country remained at risk of forced eviction by local authorities without legal safeguards. In March, the Kathmandu Metropolitan Office issued a directive to people living in slums and informal settlements along the riverbanks in Kathmandu to vacate the areas within a week. The Patan High Court suspended the demolition order and ordered the government, including the Metropolitan Office, to arrange housing for those who would be made homeless as a result of the evictions.

The government failed to adequately monitor, investigate and sanction the illegal activities of recruitment agencies and agents that charge migrant workers exorbitant fees. Effective measures to prevent, investigate and clarify the deaths of migrant workers, such as through bilateral dialogues with the governments of destination countries, were not taken. Difficulties in accessing the Workers Welfare Fund left many families of deceased migrant workers without support.³

In November, an earthquake in Karnali province resulted in more than 150 deaths and damage to some 25,000 homes and other public infrastructure. The government’s relief support was inadequate, especially given the harsh winter season, and at least 24 earthquake-affected people living in makeshift tents died.

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1. [Nepal: Transitional Justice Bill needs to protect victims, not abusers; proposed law disregards domestic and international legal standards, 24 March](#)
 2. [“Nepal: District Court’s historic verdict a welcome step for justice for Dalit community”, 7 December](#)
 3. [Saudi Arabia: ‘Don’t worry, it’s a branch of Amazon’: Exploitation of migrant workers contracted to Amazon in Saudi Arabia, 10 October](#)