



## Summary of GCC Countries' Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (2006)

The US State Department released its “2006 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices” during the first week of March. Following is a summary of its contents related to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries compiled by the Gulf Research Center.

### Overall Conditions:

The respect for human rights in the six GCC countries remained “poor” in 2006. Even though there was an increasing public and media discourse about human rights, and increasing tendency of governments to open political systems and allow participation, the GCC governments did not fulfill basic democratic requirements.

Many of the GCC citizens lack the right to change the government or form political parties; they suffer unlawful deprivation of life; maltreatment in prisons, including abuse of detainees; incomplete independence of the judiciary; restricted freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, and religion; limits on freedom of movement for certain groups of people; and corruption.

### Prison and Detention Center Conditions:

NGOs and human rights organizations were allowed to visit prisons in the GCC countries. While human rights organizations noted general problems related to hygiene, food, lack of medical service, proper sanitation and overcrowded conditions, most prisons in the GCC countries – among them *Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar* – were generally acceptable and adhered to international standards.

### Freedom of Speech – Internet:

The constitutions of the GCC countries provide for freedom of speech and the press. However, the governments restricted these rights. *Saudi Arabia* is the only country where the constitution does not provide freedom of speech.

National telecommunication companies made Internet access available throughout the GCC countries. However, numerous websites were blocked, because they were considered pornographic, politically sensitive, or competitive with local telecommunication services.

Some of the GCC countries adopted legislations to regulate and control the use of Internet. *Saudi Arabia* approved in October 2006 the first law to combat electronic crimes, such as defamation on the Internet, hacking, unauthorized access to government websites and stealing information relating to national security. The *UAE* enacted the information and privacy “cyber crime” law to combat the misuse of Internet to commit a wide variety of crimes.

## **Elections and Political Participation:**

The year reflected the general trend of the GCC governments opening the political systems. Parliamentary elections took place in *Bahrain*, *Kuwait* and the *UAE* and international observers considered such parliamentary elections as in *Kuwait* as “generally free and fair.” In many of the GCC countries such as the *UAE*, *Bahrain* or *Kuwait*, women are allowed to vote and run for office.

*Saudi Arabia* witnessed the slowest progress towards political openness: in comparison to other GCC countries, women do not hold higher governmental positions; there are no women in the cabinet, and in the last municipal election women were not allowed to vote.

Political parties are formally banned in all the GCC countries. However, in *Kuwait* and *Bahrain*, there are de facto political groupings.

## **Government Corruption and Transparency:**

Government corruption and lack of transparency is a key problem in all the GCC countries. There is widespread corruption in the executive and legislative branches of government. As a result, the GCC governments have undertaken several initiatives to counter corruption. However, the problem is that such initiatives are not implemented consistently throughout the government.

*Qatar*'s Ministry of Economy and Commerce and the Central Bank provided published material on laws and procedures for the public, to increase awareness. The *Abu Dhabi* emirate established a special anti-corruption section within the police to investigate and prosecute corruption-related violations. *Oman* sent several high-ranking government officials, including a undersecretary and a member of the State Council, to prison for bribery, misuse of public office and breach of trust. In *Kuwait*, combating corruption was the main theme of the June parliamentary elections. *Saudi Arabia* was slow in combating corruption, and information concerning government actions against corruption were not made available for the public.

## **Societal Abuses and Discrimination:**

There is noticeable anti-Semitism in the media as seen in anti-Semitic cartoons along the illustration of negative images of Jews and Jewish symbols in some of the GCC countries, among them *Oman* (*Al-Watan*), or in *Qatar* (*Al-Watan*, *Al-Sharq*). In May 2006, Freedom House released a report about *Saudi Arabia* and stated that its review of textbooks revealed examples of hate speech and in particular noted that religious textbooks emphasized intolerance and hatred of religious traditions, especially Christianity and Judaism. In November the government announced a multi-year project to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to promote tolerance and remove content disparaging religions other than Islam.

The Shiite population remains disadvantaged in countries like *Kuwait*, *Saudi Arabia* or *Bahrain* – in the provision of mosques, in access to Shiite religious education, and representation in higher levels of government. In *Bahrain* and *Saudi Arabia*, Sunnis receive preference for employment in sensitive government positions and in the managerial ranks of civil servants. However, in *Saudi Arabia*, King Abdullah opened a dialogue with the Shiite minority of the Eastern Provinces. At least four of the 150-member appointed Consultative Council are Shiites.

## **Labor Rights:**

In some GCC countries, there were incidents of labor strikes and demands have been made for the formation of labor unions to defend workers' rights.

In *Dubai* (UAE), over 1,600 workers went on strike during the year after not having been paid in four months and for living in unhealthy conditions. The Ministry of Labor quickly met with both labor and company representatives and ordered the companies to immediately pay all wages.

The Ministry of Labor distributed information to foreign workers, available in five languages, both directly and through their sponsoring companies' public affairs offices, outlining their rights under the labor law and explaining how to pursue labor disputes, whether individually or collectively.

The GCC countries increasingly addressed the abuse and exploitation of foreign workers (such as sexual harassment, mistreatment and non-payment of salaries) and modified their labor laws. In *Saudi Arabia*, the labor ministry established the department for protection of foreign workers, and in the first six months of the year, the labor minister banned 75 companies from obtaining labor visas. In *Oman*, the government passed comprehensive legislation to improve worker rights. On July 9, Royal Decree 74 officially recognized worker rights to form unions, formerly called "representative committees," and a General Federation, formerly called "The Main Representative Committee," to represent unions at regional and international fora. The decree also amended Articles 108 and 110 of the 2003 Labor Law to allow more than one union per firm. The government of *Bahrain* enacted a new labor legislation during the year providing protection to workers terminated for their union activities and requiring extra compensation for workers who are not paid their salaries on time.