

Belize 2023 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Belize during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings; inhuman and degrading treatment by security officers; arbitrary arrest or detention; refoulement of refugees to a country where they would face serious harms, such as a threat to life or freedom or other mistreatment that would constitute a separate human rights abuse; serious government corruption; and extensive gender-based violence, including domestic and intimate partner violence.

The government took credible steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

In March police officers shot and killed Dyandre Chi when he fled from arrest on a motorcycle in Orange Walk Town. Police officers claimed they shot at Chi and a companion after hearing gunshots from the motorcycle. The man accompanying Chi told police the sound officers heard was from the motorcycle engine. He also claimed officers used threats and intimidation to pressure him to recant his testimony. After an internal investigation, police corporal Esmin Flores and police constable Salomen Cowo were arrested for killing Chi. They both remained in custody awaiting trial at year's end.

In June the director of public prosecutions withdrew manslaughter charges against two police officers involved in the death of Derrick Uh, who died of heat stroke from a 13-hour confinement in a police van in August 2022. Cases brought against two other officers for the same crime continued, and both were suspended from duty awaiting trial. In August Uh's family reached a settlement with the government and received compensation.

The Belize Police Department (BPD) opened a case regarding the death of Andrew McDougal of Stann Creek District, who was beaten by two police officers in December 2022. Cell phone video showed officers beating and slamming McDougal against a police vehicle. An autopsy report indicated McDougal died of internal bleeding due to the beatings. Two police officers were arrested for his death, John Lucas and Jameel Lewis. Another officer, Tessa Stuart, was charged with perverting the course of justice because she

lied in her statement. All three officers were suspended. The matter was referred to prosecutors and was pending before the court.

In April police officer Kareem Martinez was found guilty and sentenced to 18 years in prison for the death of Laddie Gillett, age 14. Police officers fatally shot Gillett in the back in 2021 while chasing him and another young person when responding to a call regarding a burglary in progress.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and Other Related Abuses

The constitution prohibited torture and other inhuman punishment, but there were credible reports that law enforcement agents employed them.

Through the end of August, the Professional Standards Branch registered 99 formal complaints against members of the BPD, representing a 43 percent increase of reports compared with all of 2022. The BPD's Professional Standards Branch resolved 46 of the complaints, 38 were under investigation, and 15 cases awaited trial. Complaints included assault, wounding and harm, unlawful arrest and detention, extortion, theft, and

preventing the course of justice. The BPD dismissed 10 officers as a result of complaints, and several other officers were fined or reduced in rank after being found guilty of offenses committed.

In April police officers Romelio Logan, Reydel Teck, and Jashmir Cobb were sentenced to nine years in prison for the 2016 death of Edwin Ixpatec, who had been detained for disorderly conduct. The judgment found the officers failed in their duty to care for detainees in police custody.

During the year, prison authorities dismissed at least one security officer found guilty of unnecessary use of force on prison inmates.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

There were reports of extended isolation of prisoners in cells that lacked adequate ventilation and sanitation.

Abusive Physical Conditions: Officials arbitrarily used isolation in a small, dark, poorly ventilated punishment cell to discipline inmates. Inmates and their legal representatives said the isolation room was fetid and infested with snakes, scorpions, and roaches. Prison regulations required a medical evaluation of inmates prior to isolation and included a maximum confinement of 14 days. The regulations were not consistently followed by prison authorities, and at times inmates were kept in isolation for more than three months.

Administration: Authorities investigated credible allegations of mistreatment.

Independent Monitoring: The ombudsman and visiting justices visited the prison. Prison administrators did not readily permit access to all areas for other independent human rights observers.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. Media reported allegations that the government sometimes failed to observe these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law required police to obtain search or arrest warrants issued by a magistrate except in cases of hot pursuit, probable cause, or in the presence of a firearm. Police were required to inform detainees of their rights at the time of arrest and of the cause of their detention within 24 hours of arrest. Police were required to also bring a detainee before a magistrate to be charged officially within 48 hours. The BPD faced allegations that at times police arbitrarily detained persons for more than 48 hours without pressing charges, did not take detainees directly to a police station, and used detention as a means of intimidation.

Police usually granted detainees timely access to family members and lawyers, although there were reports of persons held in police detention without the opportunity to contact family or seek legal advice.

There was a functioning bail system for release pending trial. By law, the police officer in charge of a station or a magistrate's court could grant bail to persons charged with summary offenses. The High Court could grant bail to those charged with indictable offenses, including murder, gang activity, human trafficking, possession of an unlicensed firearm, and specific drug-trafficking or sexual offenses. The High Court generally reviewed the bail application within 10 working days. According to some defense attorneys, officers-in-charge at certain police stations denied bail in some cases of summary offenses even when legal provisions allowed for this right.

On July 28, the government instituted a 30-day state of emergency for a section of Belize City to address escalating gang violence. The measure allowed the BPD to target criminal gangs through house raids, arrests, and detention. Timely habeas corpus and other due process rights were suspended under the state of emergency. The 45 allegedly gang-affiliated men detained in the process were freed at the expiration of the state of emergency. Upon their release, several claimed prison and law enforcement authorities illegally denied them access to legal counsel.

Pretrial Detention: There were lengthy trial backlogs, particularly for serious crimes such as murder. Problems included delays in police

completion of investigations, lack of evidence collection, court delays in preparing depositions, and adjournments in the courts. Judges were typically slow to issue rulings, in some cases taking a year or longer. The time between arrest, trial, and conviction ranged from six months to three years. Pretrial detention for persons accused of murder averaged three to four years.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provided for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence and impartiality.

Trial Procedures

The law provided for the right to a fair and public trial, and the judiciary generally enforced this right, although long delays in holding trials occurred.

There was no requirement for defendants to have legal representation except in cases involving murder. The Supreme Court's registrar was responsible for appointing an attorney to act on behalf of indigent defendants charged with murder. The Legal Advice and Services Center provided legal services and representation for a range of civil and criminal cases. These legal aid services were overstretched, however, and were not available in rural areas.

In May senior attorneys criticized the government for appointing a special

prosecutor to a murder case after the director of public prosecutions recused herself and her office staff from handling the matter. The director of public prosecutions was related by marriage to the accused. Some members of the Belize Bar Association and opposition legislators pointed out the appointment contravened the constitution because the minister of home affairs named a prosecutor, which should be the sole prerogative of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Due to substantial delays and a backlog of cases in the justice system, at times the courts did not bring some minor defendants to trial until after they reached age 18. In such cases, the defendants were tried as minors.

The Human Rights Commission of Belize continued to raise concerns that several immigration offenders remained imprisoned despite paying the necessary fines and completing their prison sentences. The commission expressed particular concern for the separation of children from migrant parents who served prison sentences for immigration offenses. During imprisonment, parents were unable to communicate with their children until repatriation proceedings were completed, which in most cases took more than six months.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

f. Transnational Repression

Not applicable.

g. Property Seizure and Restitution

Not applicable.

h. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution prohibited such actions, and there were no reports that the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

The constitution provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected this right. An independent press, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of expression, including for media members.

The press was largely independent of government influence, although most

radio stations, television stations, and newspapers had strong editorial ties to either the United Democratic Party (UDP) or the governing People's United Party. The independent press was often critical of government officials, with few signs of repercussions.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other

Media, Including Online Media: The government did not directly censor media outlets or penalize those who published items counter to government guidelines. Nevertheless, anecdotal accounts indicated some media outlets practiced self-censorship to appease certain politicians and powerful businesspersons who patronized the publications. According to journalists, some government-focused investigations were ordered to stop after certain politicians contacted station news directors.

In July the Elections and Boundaries Commission warned media not to publish or broadcast content of the electoral districts redivision exercise report, stating it should first be presented to legislators. The opposition party, UDP, criticized the commission, saying the action muffled the media's ability to freely express, publicly scrutinize, and openly criticize government decisions. By November the government had not published the report.

Libel/Slander Laws: Libel and slander were criminalized. In June Commissioner of Police Chester Williams sued Channel 7 and Channel 5 news stations after they presented a social media statement from opposition leader Moses "Shyne" Barrow claiming Williams issued a gun

license to an individual without proper due diligence. Through his attorney, Williams called the statement “entirely inaccurate...and highly defamatory” and demanded a public apology. Both stations complied. The commissioner also sued Barrow; as of November, no court date had been set for hearing the case.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The law provided for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

In August the government denied the opposition UDP a demonstration permit in San Pedro Town. Despite the denial, UDP members held the demonstration but were interrupted by police officers. UDP Senator Michael Peyrefitte called the government’s action a breach of the constitutional right to peaceful assembly.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at

<https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The law provided for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

In September immigration attorney Orson Elrington contended the government denied the rights of his client James Kojo Erimea, a citizen of Sierra Leone. Elrington explained that his client entered Belize illegally and was detained, charged with an immigration offense, and imprisoned. The court issued a deportation order. During his detention, Erimea accused an immigration officer of extorting him. Elrington argued his client was illegally detained since he had served his prison sentence and his family had provided funds for him to return to his home country. As of September, Erimea remained detained at the Belize Central Prison.

e. Protection of Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other international organizations to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. The Ministry of Human

Development, Families, and Indigenous Peoples' Affairs and the Ministry of Immigration shared responsibility in handling the refugee process and in providing for refugee protection and needs.

Access to Asylum: The law provided for the granting of refugee status, and the government had established a system for providing protection to refugees. The government did not recognize a legal status of “asylum” and treated all applicants as potential refugees. The courts and executive offices used procedures for refugees to cover both refugees and asylum seekers.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) indicated there was an increased number of Brazilian and Haitian citizens entering the country. The Human Rights Commission reported that many individuals registered complaints of not being allowed to file for refugee applications.

The government extended the deadline for its amnesty program for qualifying “irregular” immigrants to March 30. The program sought to benefit immigrants who entered the country before March 2020, those who were previously recommended asylum, and those who were under special protection by the state. At the close of the program, approximately 13,000 persons had registered for amnesty, including at least four victims of human trafficking, and the government was in the process of performing background investigations on candidates.

Refoulement: During the year, the government repatriated Cuban nationals

who claimed their lives or freedom would be threatened due to their opposition to the Cuban government. Belize and Cuba had an agreement that required Belize to return to Cuba all irregular immigrants with Cuban citizenship.

Abuse of Refugees and Asylum Seekers: In March the attorney for a Haitian citizen seeking refuge claimed his client was wrongfully imprisoned, denied access to justice, and unlawfully deported to Guatemala. According to attorney Arthur Saldivar, Abi Aladdin left his country to seek refuge in Belize after his father was persecuted because of civil unrest in Haiti. He illegally entered Belize through the border with Guatemala and was detained by authorities. He could not pay a fine for illegal entry and was sentenced to six months' imprisonment. According to Saldivar, days before Aladdin completed his custodial sentence, immigration authorities removed him from the prison and deported him to Guatemala without allowing him an appearance in court. Media reports indicated Director of Immigration Debra Baptist Estrada stated there was an order for Aladdin's removal.

Also in March, the attorney for a Haitian couple wrote to the Ministry of Immigration demanding better treatment of his clients after they were detained in Orange Walk District. Attorney Rene Montero Jr. indicated the Haitian couple, one of whom was pregnant, had not been provided food or water, placing severe stress on the pregnant woman that led to her hospitalization. Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, and Immigration

Eamon Courtenay denied the accusation, stating the two Haitians were treated appropriately by immigration officers.

A Brazilian citizen who served time in prison for immigration offenses accused prison authorities of mistreatment and denial of certain services while in detention. Prison authorities denied the accusation.

Employment: In general, persons awaiting adjudication of their refugee applications were unable to work legally in the country. A 2021 government policy, however, allowed persons whose refugee status was pending finalization to work in the sugar, citrus, and banana industries.

Access to Basic Services: Refugees and asylum seekers were able to use the education system and the socialized medical system, but the government offered no assistance with housing or food except in extreme cases that involved children and pregnant women. UNHCR reported that several refugees claimed health providers discriminated against them when they accessed public clinics and hospitals.

Temporary Protection: The Immigration Department issued renewable special residency permits for periods of 60 to 90 days to those who applied for refugee status. A government policy allowed for the renewal of protection status every three months for persons approved by the Refugee Eligibility Committee and awaiting the minister's final approval.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provided citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections: National elections were widely reported to be fair and free of abuses and irregularities.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The opposition party alleged that being a member of the ruling Peoples United Party conferred certain advantages in gaining employment, permits, or government contracts at the local and national levels. This belief was widely shared by the public.

Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable Groups: Observers noted that cultural and societal constraints, including strong discouragement from family members and a general voter bias for electing men, limited the number of women running for elected office.

Section 4. Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but the

government did not implement the law effectively, and officials often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. Allegations of corruption in government among public officials, including ministers, deputy ministers, and chief executive officers, were numerous, although in most cases no substantial proof was presented.

Corruption: In July the senate created a special select committee to investigate an agreement the government had previously signed with Portico Enterprises Ltd., a developer bidding to construct a cruise ship port in Belize City. According to the government, the agreement was signed by Former Minister of Economic Development Erwin Contreras without approval and awarded major concessions to the company, including exemptions from several duties and taxes.

For additional information about corruption in the country, please see the Department of State's *Investment Climate Statement* for the country, and the Department of State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A variety of domestic and international human rights groups generally

operated without government restriction to monitor and investigate human rights conditions or cases and publish their findings. Government officials often were cooperative and responsive to the views of these groups.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The ombudsman, appointed by the prime minister and ratified by parliament, acted as an independent check on governmental abuses. On February 10, Herman Gilbert Swazo became the ombudsman. The office was previously vacant for 22 months after the government refused to renew the contract of the former ombudsman. While the Office of the Ombudsman had wide investigative powers, it lacked effective enforcement authority. The office operated under significant staffing and other constraints. Observers did not consider the Office of the Ombudsman independent and effective.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalized rape of men or women, including spousal and domestic or intimate partner rape and other forms of domestic and sexual violence. So-called corrective rape of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) persons was not specified in the law. The government did not enforce the law effectively. The law stipulated a sentence of imprisonment for eight years to life for

rape, although on occasion sentences were much lighter. Problems facing the wider justice system generally resulted in low conviction rates for rape. Survivors of spousal rape frequently requested the charges be dropped, often citing economic support from the perpetrator as key to providing for their children's well-being.

Gender-based violence remained an endemic problem. The Belize Crime Observatory, a BPD unit, indicated women were the victims in 86 percent of the gender-based violence cases registered by the BPD through the end of August, with 54 percent of violence being perpetrated by intimate partners. Eighty-nine percent of reports led to arrests and court actions, compared with 65 percent in the same time period in 2022. Public perception was that insufficient numbers of police officers and inadequate funding hampered investigations.

Some NGOs working with the defense force indicated that sexual assault was a problem in the organization. In August officials initiated investigations into two cases of sexual assault. As of the end of October, the investigations continued.

Domestic violence was prohibited by law, and the law was generally enforced. Survivors noted the procedure was lengthy but that nevertheless, when charges were not dropped by victims, generally perpetrators were convicted. Domestic violence was considered a civil matter; however, perpetrators were often prosecuted for criminal charges such as harm,

wounding, grievous harm, rape, and marital rape. Police, prosecutors, and judges recognized both physical violence and mental injury as evidence of domestic violence. Penalties included fines and imprisonment. The law empowered the Family Court to issue protection orders against accused offenders.

The government conducted awareness campaigns against gender-based violence, including domestic violence. It had a domestic violence hotline and shelters for survivors. Major police stations designated domestic violence officers. Due to understaffed police stations, these measures were not always operational.

In 2022 the government elevated the status of the National Women's Commission from an advisory body to a statutory body under the Ministry of Human Development, Families, and Indigenous People's Affairs. The change allowed the commission to legally address gender matters and coordinate among government institutions and private sector all national efforts relating to gender equality, equity, and women's empowerment.

Other Forms of Gender-based Violence or Harassment: The law provided protection from sexual harassment in the workplace, including provisions against unfair dismissal of a victim of sexual harassment. The government enforced the law, but officials noted no criminal cases had ever been brought under the law's sexual harassment provisions. The Women's Department, under the Ministry of Human Development, Families, and

Indigenous Peoples' Affairs, recognized sexual harassment as a subset of sexual violence. Local NGOs continued to be concerned that some victims did not report sexual harassment due to fear of further victimization or losing their job.

Discrimination: The law provided the same legal status and rights for women as for men, but the government did not always protect those rights.

Despite legal provisions for gender equality and government programs aimed at empowering women, NGOs and other observers reported women faced social and economic discrimination. Although women participated in all spheres of national life, outnumbered men in university classrooms, and had higher graduation rates from high school, they held relatively few top managerial or government positions.

The law mandated equal pay for equal work, but the labor commissioner verified that men on average earned more per month than women did, often because men held higher positions, and some reports indicated women earned 55 percent of what men earned. Although there were no restrictions on women working in industries such as mining, construction, factories, energy, water, and transportation, the percentage of women employed in these sectors was low. The law provided for the continuity of employment and protection against unfair dismissal and prohibited sexual harassment in the workplace, pregnancy, or HIV status, but the law was not enforced.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

According to some NGOs, women from socially conservative Mennonite communities seeking tubal ligation sought the permission of the husband for cultural and religious reasons. Emergency contraception was not always available as a method for family planning because of insufficient supply across public facilities.

Access to emergency health care, including services for the management of complications arising from abortions, while afforded at public facilities, was not always readily obtainable due to stigma and cultural prejudices. These services were available at private facilities, but much of the population could not afford the cost.

The government provided access to sexual and reproductive health services including counseling to survivors of sexual violence, but the government often lacked sufficient rape response kits, including insufficient supplies of emergency contraception and postexposure prophylaxis. Sexual and reproductive health services were not always made available to persons under the age of 18 at public clinics without the consent of a parent or guardian.

In April the government removed the general sales tax on sanitary feminine products to improve access to these items; however, CARICOM tariffs on the

products remained as part of an external tariff framework. Despite the changes, certain retail stores and import companies continued to include the general sales tax on the items.

Reports noted some religiously affiliated educational institutions did not allow pregnant girls to attend school. Because of the stigma against underage pregnancy and discrimination targeting pregnant girls, some families opted not to report the matter to authorities, and instead girls withdrew from school for a portion of their pregnancy and then were enrolled at another institution following the birth. Male adolescents involved in the case normally did not face expulsion. Because school attendance was by law compulsory only to age 14, educational institutions were not obligated to enroll pregnant girls older than 14.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The constitution provided for the right to freedom from discrimination and violence based on race and skin color, but there were no specific laws or regulations prohibiting violence or discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity. There were anecdotal reports of racial discrimination in the workplace and in wider society against ethnic minority groups and against members of the migrant community.

Indigenous Peoples

There were no separate legal system or laws concerning Indigenous persons, since the government maintained that it treated all citizens equally. Both public and private employers generally treated Indigenous persons equally with members of other ethnic groups for employment and other purposes.

The Maya Leaders' Alliance (MLA) continued a dialogue with the government and monitored development in the Toledo District with the goal of implementing the 2015 Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) consent order on Maya customary land tenure. In August the MLA and Toledo Alcalde Association (TAA) expressed dissatisfaction in the way the government was carrying out consultations for the establishment of a "customary land-tenure" policy to enforce the court orders. Cristina Coc, spokesperson for the MLA and TAA, said the government consultations were not inclusive of all impacted communities.

In January Minister of State Michael Espat made controversial remarks regarding the Maya people in Toledo District. He stated the 2015 CCJ consent order would sow racial division, separation, and a dilution of the government's power in the district and added the "Maya culture movement" was bad for the country because it was influenced by external interests. He called for a "sledgehammer" to break down the Indigenous rights movement. Minister of Indigenous People's Affairs Dolores

Balderamos Garcia called Espat's remarks "unfortunate" and stated they did not "reflect the position of the government." The government reaffirmed its commitment to full compliance with the terms of the CCJ consent order and condemned the use of any racist language and fearmongering in relation to Maya land rights.

In March tensions rose between the communities of Yemeri Grove and the Maya village of Laguna, both in the Toledo District, after Yemeri Grove residents accused residents of the neighboring Maya village of encroaching on their territory. Residents of Yemeri Grove expressed concern for their safety because they had been threatened with sticks and machetes by residents of Laguna regarding the differences in the village boundary demarcations. Minister Balderamos Garcia issued a cautionary letter to the TAA and MLA against "expansionist positions being adopted by the Maya villages." Spokesperson Cristina Coc called this "blatant discrimination and mischief making." In May the matter escalated when residents of Yemeri Grove destroyed concrete survey markers erected by the Laguna community leaders. The minister declared Laguna leaders had illegally placed the survey markers. Coc responded that in Laguna community, "We know our extent of use, we are not trying to take away or grab what we don't already use and occupy."

Children

Birth Registration: Failure to register hindered the process for receiving a social security card to access services such as health care and education. Children without birth certificates had trouble registering for school and often had to move from school to school.

The Human Rights Commission estimated a substantial number of persons living in remote communities who were born in Belize, and therefore entitled to Belizean citizenship, were not registered in the national birth registry, barring them from benefits such as formal employment, education beyond primary level, and full public health services. In October and December 2022, the commission held clinics in the northern region of the country to register hundreds of children and adults who were not registered at birth.

Child Abuse: There were laws against child abuse, and the government generally enforced these laws effectively. The law allowed authorities to remove a child from an abusive home environment and required parents to maintain and support children until age 18. There were publicized cases of underage girls being victims of sexual abuse and mistreatment, in most cases in their own or a relative's home.

In January the Ministry of Education initiated an investigation of a male teacher at Canaan Seventh Day Adventist High School for inappropriate

behavior toward a female student. Through social media, the teacher told the student he wanted a romantic and physical relationship and asked the student to keep it a secret. The student told her father, who complained to the school administration. School officials, however, did not provide a timely response. The Ministry of Education declared it had started an investigation, and the teacher involved was suspended.

In April special police constable Jeremy Bermudez was found guilty of raping a girl age 13. According to police investigations, his behavior continued for one year. He remained on remand at the central prison awaiting sentencing at year's end. In May a father was sentenced to 15 years in prison for raping his teenage daughter for more than five years.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age to marry was 18, but persons ages 16 to 17 could legally marry with the consent of parents, legal guardians, or judicial authorities. The government did not effectively enforce the law. According to UNICEF, 29 percent of women ages 20 to 49 were married or cohabiting before reaching 18. Early marriage was more prevalent in certain areas – Toledo, Corozal, and Orange Walk – and among the Maya and Mestizo ethnic groups. During the year, the National Commission for Families and Children held sensitization sessions with a faith-based organization that encouraged and condoned early marriage. The sessions included information on statutes regarding early marriage.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibited the sale, grooming, or

use of children for commercial sexual exploitation, including sex trafficking. It defined a “child” as anyone younger than 18. The law allowed children ages 16 and 17 to engage in consensual, noncommercial sexual activity. NGOs and experts noted this provision made children vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation.

The legal age for consensual sex was 16, but commercial sex was not legal with persons younger than age 18. Sexual intercourse with a child younger than 14 was punishable with 12 years’ to life imprisonment. Sexual intercourse with children ages 14 to 15 was punishable by five to 10 years’ imprisonment. Civil society organizations asserted that many cases of child sexual exploitation were unreported. The law was enforced effectively.

There were anecdotal reports that boys and girls were victims of trafficking, including through “sugar daddy” arrangements whereby older men provided money to minors, the families of minors, or both, in exchange for sexual relations with the minors. Similarly, there were reports of increased child trafficking in tourist areas or where there were transient and seasonal workers, often to meet the demand of foreign sex tourists. The law criminalized the procurement or attempted procurement of persons younger than 18 to engage in commercial sex and stipulated a sentence of up to eight years’ imprisonment. The government did not consistently enforce laws prohibiting child sex trafficking.

The law established a penalty of two years’ imprisonment for publishing or

offering for sale obscene books, writings, or representation.

Antisemitism

The Jewish population was small, and there were no reports of antisemitic incidents.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

Criminalization: There were no laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults. The law prohibited “homosexual” individuals from entering the country, but immigration authorities did not enforce the law. Neutral laws were not disproportionately applied to LGBTQI+ persons.

Violence and Harassment: The NGO Promoting Empowerment Through Awareness for Lesbians and Bisexual Women (PETAL) registered 117 and the LGBTQI+ advocacy NGO UniBAM registered 15 complaints of human rights

abuses against LGBTQI+ persons as of August. According to PETAL, the abuses included employment dismissal, employment denial, refusal of authorities to register and investigate abuses, unlawful home eviction, grievous harm on LGBTQI+ persons, and cyberbullying because of the individuals' gender identity or sexual orientation.

UniBAM stated that legislation was inconsistent with the constitution, which provided for equal protection and equal treatment. The NGO stated the government failed to enact any of the 17 LGBTQI+ related recommendations it accepted as part of the 2018 Universal Periodic Review, such as equality and hate crime legislation to provide protection against discrimination and violence. Both PETAL and UniBAM noted that assault and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity continued to be substantially underreported due to victims' fear of further victimization by authorities. UniBAM's director, Caleb Orozco, said that in police stations, officers refused to take reports from LGBTQI+ victims who experienced discrimination or gender-based violence. Other LGBTQI+ organizations stated that in communities with very conservative religious affiliations, persons were at times denied medical services and education and encountered family-based violence.

In April a lesbian woman from Belize City reported she was harassed and threatened by neighbors because of her gender identity. The woman tried several times to make a report to police, but officers declined to take her

complaint. Hecklers damaged the victim's property.

Discrimination: The constitution prohibited discrimination based on sex, which was interpreted to include sexual orientation by the judiciary. The law did not prohibit discrimination specifically against LGBTQI+ persons in housing, employment, nationality laws, or access to government services, such as health care, but the constitution generally provided for the protection of all citizens from any type of discrimination. State institutions lacked official reporting data on the extent of discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex characteristics, but NGO representatives noted cases were considerable in number.

The law did not recognize LGBTQI+ couples and their families. In February a transgender man faced a civil suit from his partner, who intended to have the man's parental rights removed based on his gender identity. The partner argued that family and children's legislation did not acknowledge same-sex couples and as such the transgender man should not be allowed parental rights. The court ruled in favor of the transgender man on the basis of his biological parentage.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: Legal gender recognition was not available.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: There were no reported involuntary or coercive medical or psychological practices

specifically targeting LGBTQI+ individuals. There were no reports of medically unnecessary and irreversible “normalization” surgeries performed on children or on nonconsenting adult intersex persons.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly:

There were no restrictions on freedom of expression, association, or peaceful assembly regarding LGBTQI+ issues.

Persons with Disabilities

The law did not expressly prohibit discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities, but the constitution provided for the protection of all citizens from any type of discrimination.

The law did not mandate accessibility accommodations for persons with disabilities, and most public and private buildings and transportation were not accessible. Certain businesses and government departments had designated clerks to attend to the elderly and persons with disabilities.

There were no policies to encourage hiring persons with disabilities in the public or private sectors. The government did not provide all information in accessible formats. There were isolated reports of violence against persons with disabilities.

Mental health provisions and protections were generally poor. Informal government-organized committees advocating for persons with disabilities were tasked with public education and advocating for protections against

discrimination. The country did not have a reliable system for identifying persons with disabilities who needed services. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Technology maintained the National Resource Center for Inclusive Education, which offered screening, diagnostic assessments, teacher training, parent and school support, specific therapies for students with special needs, and segregated education programs within the mainstream school system.

Children with disabilities attended specific classrooms with no more than 15 pupils for every two teachers, all of whom were trained to work with students with disabilities. Postprimary and postsecondary educational services, vocational training, and life skills development opportunities were limited. One private school, one public school, and five education centers in the country specialized in working with children with disabilities. These education centers were attached to public schools under the same management. Children with disabilities attended mainstream schools through the secondary level at a significantly lower rate than other children and were placed with nondisabled peers.

The Association of Defense Attorneys noted that approximately 90 inmates with mental health conditions were imprisoned at the Belize Central Prison, where they received limited medical attention and were kept with the general prison population.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

There was some discrimination against persons with HIV and AIDS. The government worked to combat it through public education efforts of the National AIDS Commission and the Ministry of Human Development.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law generally provided for the right to establish and join independent trade unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The Ministry of Rural Transformation, Community Development, Labor, and Local Government (Ministry of Labor) recognized unions and employers associations after they were registered. The law established procedures for the registration and status of trade unions and employer organizations and for collective bargaining. The law prohibited antiunion discrimination and dissolution or suspension of unions by administrative authority, and it required reinstatement of workers fired for union activity.

The unions, under their umbrella organizations the National Trade Union Congress of Belize and the Civil Society Steering Group, were represented in the legislature by a senator whom the two entities designated. This senator

provided direct input into the political and legislative process for labor organizations.

In disputes involving public- and private-sector employees who provided “essential services,” the law allowed authorities to refer the dispute to compulsory arbitration, prohibit strikes, and terminate labor actions. The postal service, monetary and financial services, civil aviation, petroleum sector, port authority personnel (stevedores and ship pilots), and security services were deemed essential services by local laws. This list was more extensive than the International Labor Organization’s definition of essential services.

Workers could file complaints with the Ministry of Labor or seek redress from the courts for wrongful termination due to union activity, although it was difficult to prove terminations were in retaliation for such activity. The ministry’s Labor Department generally handled labor cases without lengthy delays and dealt with appeals through arbitration outside the court system. The court did not apply the law requiring reinstatement of workers fired for union activity but provided monetary compensation instead.

The government generally enforced laws protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike in the formal sector, although it did not apply the law for reinstatement of workers dismissed for union activity. The government did not effectively enforce it in the large informal sector due to a lack of registration from employers. There were complaints

of administrative and judicial delays relating to labor complaints and disputes. Penalties were less than for other similar civil rights violations. Penalties were rarely applied against violators.

Antiunion discrimination and other forms of employer interference in union functions sometimes occurred and, as a result, on several occasions unions threatened or carried out strikes. There were reports workers were intimidated into either not joining a union or dropping union membership if they had joined. This occurred predominantly in the agricultural sector, where a significant number of the workers were from Central America and working on temporary work permits.

In August the High Court declared unconstitutional the clause in the Sugar Cane Industry Act that required a cane farmer to be a member of an association to sell sugarcane. The case was brought to court by farmer Russell Navarro and the Belize Sugar Industry Limited. The court declared Navarro's constitutional rights to work and to free association had been violated by the de facto requirement contained in the act, which stated he had to be a member of a cane farmer association to be placed on the cane register for deliveries of cane to the miller.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

d. Discrimination (see section 6)

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: The law provided for a national minimum wage. It was above the poverty income level. The law set the workweek at no more than six days or 45 hours and required premium payment for overtime work. Workers were entitled to two workweeks of paid annual holiday. Additionally, there were 13 days designated as public and bank holidays. Employees who worked on public and bank holidays were entitled to pay at time-and-a-half, except for Good Friday and Christmas, which were paid at twice the normal rate.

Occupational Safety and Health: The country did not have a specific occupational safety and health (OSH) law, but the Factories Act and the Labour Act contained provisions related to occupational safety and health in the workplace. OSH regulations for all industries stipulated the employer had to take "reasonable care" for the safety of employees. The regulations further provided that every employer who provided or arranged

accommodation for workers to reside at or near a place of employment should provide and maintain sufficient and hygienic housing accommodations, a sufficient supply of clean water, and sufficient and proper sanitary arrangements. OSH experts identified unsafe conditions and developed and implemented safety regulations. Workers could remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The Ministry of Labor did not consistently enforce minimum wage, hour, and OSH regulations. Inspectors could make unannounced visits and initiate penalties, but the number of inspectors was insufficient to secure compliance, especially in the more remote areas. Fines varied according to the infraction but generally were less than those for similar crimes. Penalties were rarely applied to violators. Most labor violations pertaining to acceptable conditions of work occurred in the informal sector, but authorities were not able to properly monitor and carry out inspections.

NGOs working in migrant communities in the informal sector asserted that in certain industries, particularly the banana, citrus, and construction sectors, employers often did not respect due process, did not pay minimum wages, and classified workers as contract and nonpermanent employees to avoid providing certain benefits. Anecdotal evidence from NGOs and employers suggested that undocumented Central American workers,

particularly young service workers and agricultural laborers, were regularly paid below the minimum wage. An NGO noted that both national and migrant informal workers continued to be denied labor rights.

The International Monetary Fund estimated the informal labor sector at 47 percent of the labor force. The government did not enforce labor laws in this sector.