

# **Belize 2024 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: torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest or detention; and child marriage.

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

## **Section 1. Life**

### **a. Extrajudicial Killings**

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year.

### **b. Coercion in Population Control**

The government did not have a policy to encourage involuntary sterilization, but there were scattered reports of involuntary sterilization perpetrated by individual government health providers.

## **Section 2. Liberty**

### **a. Freedom of the Press**

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 media, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of expression, including for media members.

Media were largely independent of government influence, although most radio stations, television stations, and newspapers had strong editorial ties to either the United Democratic Party or the governing People's United Party. Independent media were often critical of government officials, with few signs of repercussions.

### **Freedom of Expression**

In April, Joseph Camp, a foreign national, accused the government of stifling his political criticism via social media accounts of the commissioner of police, Chester Williams. Camp accused Williams of directing false criminal charges against Camp under a law prohibiting the spreading of false news. Camp criticized Williams's handling of the crime situation in the country and made allegations of corruption and impropriety against Williams and Williams's son. Camp accused Williams of supporting actions that

suppressed Camp's freedom of expression.

## **b. Worker Rights**

### **Freedom of Association and 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 Labour) 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 organization 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. The 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 Labour 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 government generally enforced laws protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike in the formal sector. It did not apply the law for reinstatement of workers dismissed for union activity but provided monetary compensation instead.

The government did not effectively enforce the law 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 similar civil rights violations. Penalties were rarely applied against violators.

Antiunion discrimination and other forms of employer interference in union functions sometimes occurred. On several occasions, unions threatened or

carried out strikes in response. There were reports that 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 less educated, from other Central America countries, and working on temporary work permits. The government seldomly investigated these acts and rarely held perpetrators accountable.

## **Forced or Compulsory Labor**

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

## **Acceptable Work Conditions**

### **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, Easter Monday, 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.

Regulations provided that every employer who provided or arranged accommodation for workers to reside at or near a place of employment was required to 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. There were allegations of OSH violations in call centers, construction, and informal agriculture.

## **Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement**

The Ministry of Labour 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 and in informal sectors of

the economy. 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.

Nongovernmental organizations (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 overtime, and classified workers as contract and nonpermanent employees to avoid providing certain benefits. Anecdotal evidence from NGOs and employers suggested 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. Most informal labor existed in the agriculture, construction, and online business industries. The government did not enforce labor laws in this sector.

## **c. Disappearance and Abduction**

### **Disappearance**

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

### **Prolonged Detention without Charges**

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. There were allegations that the government sometimes failed to observe these requirements.

## **d. Violations in Religious Freedom**

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

## **e. Trafficking in Persons**

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

## **Section 3. Security of the Person**

### **a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or**



## **Punishment**

The constitution prohibited such practices, but there were credible reports authorities employed them. Some NGOs working with the Belize Defense Force indicated sexual assault was a problem in the organization. Through the end of August, the Professional Standards Branch registered 75 formal complaints against members of the Belize Police Department (BPD), representing a 24 percent decrease of reports compared with 2023. The BPD resolved 43 of the complaints, 24 were under investigation, and eight cases awaited trial. Complaints included acts to the prejudice of good order and discipline, misuse of a firearm, assault, misuse of authority, and extortion. The BPD dismissed 18 officers as a result of investigations, and several others were fined after being found guilty of offenses.

In a November ruling in civil proceedings brought by private citizen Shamar Foster for racial prejudice and mistreatment, a court found that the Professional Standards Branch of the BPD lacked transparency in handling citizen complaints of police misconduct and awarded Foster \$12,500 for breach of constitutional rights and damage to property.

## **b. Protection of Children**

### **Child Labor**

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/>.

## **Child Marriage**

In November, parliament amended the Marriage Act to prohibit marriage and early unions below 18 years of age. Formerly, the law allowed marriage of persons ages 16 to 17 with the consent of parents, legal guardians, or judicial authorities, but the government did not effectively enforce the previous 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.

## **c. Protection to Refugees**

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees 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.

## **Provision of First Asylum**

The law provided for the granting of refugee status, and the government

had 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.

The Human Rights Commission reported many individuals complained they were not allowed to file refugee applications.

## **Resettlement**

The government accepted refugees for resettlement and offered naturalization to qualifying refugees. The International Organization for Migration assisted some refugees to voluntarily return to their home countries. The government made slow but steady progress on a program to regularize the status of approximately 14,000 regional migrants in the country.

## **d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement**

The Jewish population numbered fewer than 50 members, and there were no reports of antisemitic incidents.