

# **Sao Tome and Principe 2024 Human Rights Report**

## **Executive Summary**

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Sao Tome and Principe during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists and censorship; and significant presence of any of the worst forms of child labor.

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

## **Section 1. Life**

### **a. Extrajudicial Killings**

There was one report the government or its agents committed an arbitrary or unlawful killing during the year. On July 29, Silvino Simao died two days after he was reportedly beaten by police in the southern part of the country after complaining about police inaction regarding a crime he reported.

According to police, the case remained under investigation and the police official in charge of the shift, whose name was not disclosed by authorities,

was indefinitely suspended pending the results. At year's end, none of the other officers involved were disciplined or charged with any wrongdoing.

Seven armed forces members charged in the extrajudicial killing of four civilians who attacked an army barracks in 2022 remained in detention awaiting trial. In 2023, a civil judge referred their cases to a military tribunal, a decision challenged by the public prosecutor on the grounds that a trial in military court would likely not result in an impartial verdict. The outcome of the appeal was pending at year's end.

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

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

## **Section 2. Liberty**

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

The constitution and law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected this right. A somewhat independent media and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of expression, although the press was occasionally susceptible to political influence and manipulation. The law mandated all public entities be neutral during

political campaigns, but some opposition leaders claimed state-run media edited content presented by opposition parties and otherwise provided coverage that boosted the ruling coalition.

Blasphemy was prohibited under provisions that allowed a person who mocked or vilified religious beliefs or acts of religious worship to be punished by up to a year in prison and a fine. There were no reported prosecutions under this law during the year.

### **Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure**

In a May 3 radio broadcast, Vicente Coello, a priest and director of the radio station Jubilar, decried what he characterized as a lack of media freedom and criticized state-owned media outlets for censorship and not holding debates on the country's political situation. Coello reported he received death threats in response to this broadcast.

### **Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups**

Journalists claimed to practice self-censorship, particularly at government-owned media entities, which were the country's most significant news sources. Journalists indicated top editors and producers at government-owned media outlets were typically linked to the ruling political party, which influenced reporting on politically sensitive topics. They stated government

supporters censored political matters, placing journalists in a position where they had to choose between informing the public or pleasing their government employers. Independent journalists stated obtaining access to official sources, mainly legal documents, was difficult due to a lack of government transparency on sensitive topics, particularly the 2022 military barracks attack.

## **b. Worker Rights**

### **Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining**

The law provided for the right of workers to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. While the law recognized the right to collective bargaining, there were no regulations governing this right. The law did not prohibit antiunion discrimination or acts of interference committed by employers against trade unions. While the law provided for the right to strike, including by government employees, and other essential workers, this right was strictly regulated.

The provisions regulating strikes required agreement by a majority of workers before a strike could be called, and replacement workers could be hired without consultation with trade unions to perform essential services if an enterprise was threatened by a strike. The law provided a list of specific minimum or essential services. An arbitration tribunal appointed by the labor minister mediated any disagreement regarding what constituted

“minimum service” between an employer and a union. The law also required compulsory arbitration before striking for certain services, including postal, banking, and loan services. Worker organizations were restricted in the military and police forces but generally were independent of government and political parties.

While the law prohibited retaliation against strikers and required reinstatement of workers fired for legal union activity, the government did not effectively enforce laws protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike for workers. The penalties for such abuses were commensurate with those for analogous violations such as civil rights violations but were never applied against violators. The lack of prosecutions for acts of antiunion discrimination or acts of interference against trade union organizations reportedly contributed to discrimination.

Some informal workers organized trade unions, including fish sellers, informal traders, motorbike taxi drivers, and port and dock workers. Informal worker unions advocated member interests in discussions on government fees and licenses and sometimes provided union members access to credit.

Workers’ collective bargaining rights were relatively weak and little used due to the government’s role as the principal employer in the formal wage sector and as key interlocutor for organized labor on all work-related matters, including union rights and restrictions. The two labor unions, the

General Union of Workers of Sao Tome and Principe and the National Organization of Workers of Sao Tome and Principe, negotiated with the government on behalf of their members on an irregular basis.

Due to government budget deficits, strikes and announcements of strikes were pervasive in many government-owned sectors or in sectors where the government had an interest. This included the port, airport, electricity, and education sectors. The government went through several separate rounds of negotiations with the Union of Port Employees, the Union of Airport Employees, and the Union of the Water and Electricity Enterprise Employees, to discuss and clarify the government concession of these enterprises to a Turkish group.

During a month-long strike in the education sector, the Education Ministry and the Teachers Unions carried out several rounds of negotiations until both parties reached a “temporary agreement” in early April.

## **Forced or Compulsory Labor**

There were no confirmed reports during the year that traffickers exploited domestic or foreign victims in the country or that traffickers exploited nationals as victims abroad.

The law prohibited all forms of forced or compulsory labor, including by children. The government did not effectively enforce the law. Inspections were insufficient to enforce compliance, especially in the large informal

sector. There were no official reports of forced or compulsory labor.

## **Acceptable Work Conditions**

### **Wage and Hour Laws**

The minimum wage for public employees was above the poverty line. The minimum wage in the private sector varied by sector and was above the poverty line in all cases. The legal workweek was 40 hours. Shopkeepers who wished to keep their stores open more than 40 hours a week could ask for an exception, which, if granted, required them to pay their workers overtime or have them work in shifts. The law provided for compensation for overtime work. The law specified occupations in which civil servants could work second jobs, which was a common practice. Private-sector security guards often worked longer than the legal maximum, with some reports of 24-hour shifts, according to labor leaders.

### **Occupational Safety and Health**

The law prescribed appropriate occupational safety and health (OSH) standards for all sectors. Workers could remove themselves from situations endangering health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, but authorities had limited capacity to enforce this right. Working conditions on many of the largely family-owned cocoa farms were unregulated and harsh, with long hours for workers and exposure to the elements and hazardous conditions.

In construction, few workers were outfitted with appropriate personal protective equipment (boots, helmet, or gloves) and accidents were rarely reported to the government or labor unions. In the fishing sector, many workers did not have life vests, compasses, or life rafts. There were government programs to sell some of this equipment at greatly reduced costs or to provide it for free. Informal worker unions sometimes provided protective equipment to members at reduced cost.

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

The government did not effectively enforce minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. The Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Labor were responsible for enforcement of appropriate OSH standards and for identifying unsafe situations. Ministry of Labor inspectors had the authority to conduct unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions but were insufficient in number and training to enforce compliance. Inspectors lacked the necessary human resources, as well as basic equipment, to conduct regular inspections. Penalties were less than those for similar violations such as fraud or negligence and were never applied against violators. Judges were reported to be less versed in the country's labor laws compared to the criminal code.

UN researchers estimated up to 68 percent of workers were in the informal sector. There was no enforcement of minimum wage or monitoring of working conditions in the informal 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 constitution and 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. The government generally observed 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**

There were no confirmed reports during the year that traffickers exploited domestic or foreign victims in the country or that traffickers exploited victims from abroad.

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

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

The constitution and law prohibited such practices, and there were no credible reports government officials employed them.

### **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**

The legal minimum age of marriage without parental consent was 18. The government did not enforce the law effectively. The government reported some religious groups celebrated marriages earlier than the age established by law, but such marriages were not legally recognized until the couple applied at the civil registry after they had both turned 18.

### **c. Protection to Refugees**

The constitution provided for the granting of asylum, but the government

did not establish a system for providing protection to asylum seekers or refugees.

### **Provision of First Asylum**

There were no reports of refugee or asylum requests.

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

There was no known Jewish community, and there were no reports of antisemitic incidents.