

Suriname 2023 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

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

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: inhuman or degrading treatment of detainees by government authorities; serious restrictions on freedom of expression in the form of criminal libel laws; serious government corruption; and the existence of some of the worst forms of child labor.

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 no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings, during the year.

On December 20, the Appellate Chamber of the Court of Justice upheld the guilty verdict of former President Desire Bouterse and affirmed his 20-year

prison sentence for the extrajudicial killing of 15 political opponents in 1982. The chamber also affirmed the convictions and 15-year prison sentences of codefendants Bennie Brondenstein, Ernst Gefferie, and Iwan Dijksteel. In addition, the chamber affirmed the conviction of codefendant Stephanus Dendoe and increased his sentence from 10 years' imprisonment to 15 years' imprisonment.

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

While the law prohibited such practices, there were multiple reports of mistreatment, beatings, and unnecessary use of force during arrests and detention. Authorities initiated criminal proceedings against police officers, prison guards, and other security forces accused of such practices. One police officer was convicted in August and sentenced to 12 months prison, of which 10 months and three weeks were conditional, with two years' probation for beating detainees during two separate arrests.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions generally met minimum international standards, but there were numerous problems in the country's 21 detention centers.

Abusive Physical Conditions: There were no significant reports regarding prison center conditions that raised human rights concerns. Nonetheless, observers noted aging prisons required upgrades and were understaffed. Facilities lacked adequate emergency exits. Cells had individual padlocks. Some persons in pretrial detention were housed with convicts.

Overcrowding was a problem in the detention centers. Older buildings had inadequate lighting, poor ventilation and sanitation, and occasional flooding. Police had no standard operating procedures to manage detention facilities. Police officers were assigned to detention facilities without any specialized training. Facilities lacked an adequate number of guards, relying instead on regular-duty police when additional assistance was necessary. Lawyers reported on multiple occasions that their clients were denied access to medical care while in detention.

Administration: Authorities investigated credible allegations of mistreatment.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted monitoring visits by 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. The government generally observed these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

Police apprehended individuals with warrants based on sufficient evidence and brought them before an independent judiciary. The law required that detainees be brought before a judge within seven days to determine the legality of their arrest, and courts generally met the deadline. An assistant district attorney or a police inspector was required to authorize incommunicado detention. If additional time was needed to investigate a charge, a judge could extend the detention period in 30-day increments up to a total of 150 days. There was no bail system. Release pending trial depended on the type of crime committed and the judge handling the case. Detainees received prompt access to counsel of their choosing, but the prosecutor could prohibit access if the prosecutor believed access could harm the investigation. Legal counsel was provided at no charge for indigent detainees. Detainees were allowed weekly visits from family members.

Pretrial Detention: Courts continued to experience delays, prolonging the detention of those awaiting trial.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

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

There were 31 judges in the country, short of the estimated 40 needed for proper functioning of the judicial system, and there was a significant backlog of cases. Cases were postponed repeatedly, adding to the backlog.

Trial Procedures

The law provided for the right to a fair and public trial, and the judiciary generally enforced this right.

The right to trial without undue delay was consistently under pressure due to lack of sufficient judges. Most cases, particularly high-profile cases, were processed only once per month. Additionally, cases were delayed due to insufficient administrative staff and technical expertise in judicial investigation. Lawyers assigned to provide legal assistance to indigent detainees complained the government stipend did not cover their costs to defend these detainees, and they threatened to cease legal assistance. Many cases requiring interpreters or psychologists were delayed due to lack of pay for these specialists.

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 law prohibited such actions, and there were no reports 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. While there were no formal restrictions on the press, actions by government and nongovernment actors impeded the

ability of independent media to conduct their work. High-ranking members of government publicly criticized media reporting.

Freedom of Expression: There were multiple arrests of persons who openly criticized government officials, primarily the president. Some protest organizers were detained for questioning and released within days without being charged. Human rights defenders argued these tactics were employed to deter criticism of the government.

Libel/Slander Laws: The country's criminal defamation laws carried penalties for convictions, with prison terms from three months to seven years. The harshest penalty was for expressing public enmity, hatred, or contempt towards the government. Throughout the year, persons were detained on charges of insulting the president or other government officials or for showing contempt for the government. None were convicted, and in most cases, persons were released without going before a judge. Critics argued these detentions were intended to limit free speech and called for the laws to be revoked.

Internet Freedom

In general, there were no government restrictions on access to the internet. Nevertheless, journalists, members of the political opposition, their supporters, and other independent entities alleged government interference with and unlawful oversight of email and social media accounts. During riots

in February, authorities restricted access to certain internet sites so that rioters could not share information, resulting in general restrictions on the internet for all.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The law provided for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association. The government required permits for groups to protest. Some groups chose to protest without a permit. In those instances, police instructed activists on permissible routes and blocked off certain areas to maintain public order.

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

e. Protection of Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner

for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, and asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law provided for granting asylum or refugee status, and the government had a system for providing protection to refugees. The country relied on UNHCR to register asylum seekers.

f. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Not applicable.

g. Stateless Persons

A 2014 amendment to the law automatically granted citizenship to a person born in the country if that person was not automatically eligible through the citizenship of one of the parents. There were reported cases of children born after 2014 to non-Surinamese parents who were denied citizenship. Children born prior to this amendment to undocumented parents were not eligible to receive citizenship until they turned 18. There were reports of stateless children or children of foreign parents who faced problems registering in schools due to improper or incomplete documentation, including a birth certificate.

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 in 2020 were widely reported to be fair and free of abuses and irregularities.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The law prohibited political organizations from running on a combination ticket in elections, putting at a disadvantage smaller parties that sought to combine their strength to challenge larger parties. Smaller parties and activists stated the registration fee for political parties to participate in elections was an attempt to create an additional burden for smaller or less wealthy parties to take part in the elections.

In August 2022, the Constitutional Court ruled the electoral law unconstitutional on the grounds it violated the rule of equality and the principle of one person, one vote. The court found that votes in rural, less populated districts outweighed those in urban, more populated areas, since it required far fewer votes to win a seat for the National Assembly in rural

districts. On October 13, the National Assembly passed an amendment to the electoral law, and October 16, an amendment to the constitution. The two amendments addressed the court's concerns by eliminating voting districts and creating one voting district for the entire country so each vote would count equally.

Section 4. Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials, and the government implemented the law effectively at times. There were numerous accusations from political opponents, civil society, and media that officials engaged in corrupt practices.

The government undertook steps towards the full implementation of the 2017 anti-corruption law by installing the National Anti-Corruption Committee in May for prevention and early detection of potential corruptive practices at government entities.

Corruption: Practically every sector of government was accused of corruption. Specific allegations were launched related to land title issuances, contracts for school transport, the sale of government property, and at state-owned companies, including the Suriname Postal Bank, the electricity company EBS, and Surinam Airways.

The appeals process continued in the case of former Minister of Finance

Gillmore Hoefdraad, who in 2021 was convicted of corruption, fraud, falsification, and money laundering, as well as taking part in a criminal organization. He was sentenced to 12 years in prison and fined 500,000 Surinamese dollars (\$16,000) in absentia. His appeal was initially denied because he was absent during the proceedings, but the Court of Justice ruled it would allow the appeal to continue in accordance with international conventions. Hoefdraad and his legal team argued the trial was politically motivated.

The appeals processes continued for Hoefdraad's accomplices – former Central Bank Governor Robert van Trikt, former Central Bank Director of Compliance Faranaaz Alibaks-Hausil, former Postal Bank Director Ginmardo Kromosoeto, and van Trikt's business partner Ashween Angnoe.

Former Vice President Ashwin Adhin, who was on trial for alleged destruction and misappropriation of government property, was acquitted of all charges; the judge found there was insufficient evidence to prove guilt.

Multiple investigations of alleged corruption filed against members of the previous and sitting government continued. The attorney general stated investigations were often prolonged while her office waited for documentation. Government entities were often slow or nonresponsive to requests for information.

For additional information concerning 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

Several independent domestic human rights groups operated without government restriction to monitor and investigate human rights conditions or cases and publish their findings. Government officials were often cooperative, although officials were not always responsive to the views of these groups.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The Human Rights Office of the Ministry of Justice and Police advised the government on regional and international proceedings against the state concerning human rights. It also prepared the state's response to various international human rights reports. Its effectiveness and independence were limited, since it was under executive branch control. It did not solicit or investigate public complaints. The legislative branch and the president's cabinet maintained their own human rights commissions.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalized rape of women and men, including spousal rape and domestic or intimate partner rape and other forms of domestic and sexual violence. The law did not specify so-called corrective rape of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) persons. The law prescribed penalties for rape or forcible sexual assault of 12 to 15 years' imprisonment and a substantial fine. The government enforced the law effectively.

Gender-based violence remained a serious and pervasive problem. The law imposed sentences of four to eight years' imprisonment for domestic violence. Government institutions collaborated with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations to raise awareness and prevent domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence. They also evaluated the legislation and procedures used in addressing cases related to gender-based violence and domestic violence and made recommendations. They trained police, health workers, and social workers, among others, to identify and handle cases of domestic and gender-based violence.

Two shelters offered women survivors and their children temporary housing; one was managed through the government's Victim Assistance

Bureau of the Ministry of Justice and Police, and the second by an NGO.

Other Forms of Gender-based Violence or Harassment: The law provided protection for workers against harassment in the private sector. The law was not applicable to civil servants, who accounted for the largest group in the workforce.

Stalking was a criminal offense, and police could investigate possible cases of stalking without a formal complaint. Pending investigation, police could issue temporary restraining orders limiting contact between the victim and suspect for up to 30 days. If found guilty, offenders could receive prison sentences ranging from four to 12 years and a large fine.

Discrimination: The law provided for a woman's right to equal access to education, employment, and property. The government did not always enforce the law effectively. Women experienced discrimination in access to employment and in rates of pay for the same or substantially similar work as men. No law prohibited gender discrimination for access to credit.

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

Survivors of sexual violence had access to government-supported health insurance that arranged services for sexual and reproductive health. Emergency contraception and postexposure prophylaxis in cases of rape were available during medical treatment of the survivor. Survivors

requested assistance either through the Ministry of Social Affairs, which was primarily responsible for issuing government-supported health insurance, or through the Bureau of Victim Care in the Ministry of Justice and Police, which provided counseling and health-care assistance to survivors.

The adolescent birth rate for girls ages 15 to 19 was 56 per 1,000 in 2021. There was a high rate of adolescent pregnancy in low-income city neighborhoods and in the interior of the country. Most individuals in this age group claimed to have an unmet need for comprehensive sexual education. These pregnancies often led girls to drop out of school.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The law stated every person had equal rights to the protection of person and goods. It further stated no persons could be discriminated against based on their race, language, or national descent. The government enforced the law effectively.

While there were no reported cases of governmental or societal violence against members of racial, ethnic, or national minorities, there was an increase in racial discrimination and ethnically focused messaging on social media, according to civil society organizations.

Indigenous Peoples

The law afforded no special protection for, nor recognition of, Indigenous

persons. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights identified the Maroons (descendants of enslaved individuals who escaped, fled to the interior, and established free communities, approximately 22 percent of the population) as tribal peoples and thus entitled to the same rights as the Indigenous Amerindian communities (approximately 4 percent of the population).

Maroons and Amerindians living in the remote and undeveloped interior had limited access to education, employment, and health and social services. Both groups participated in decisions affecting their sacred and ancestral traditions and cultures but ultimately had little or no influence in decisions affecting exploitation of energy, minerals, timber, or other natural resources on their traditional lands.

There was no effective demarcation of Maroon lands. Authorities issued titles to third parties for land where Amerindians lived or that Amerindians considered to be part of their traditional lands without consulting all stakeholders. They also granted permits and allowed logging and mining on Amerindian and Maroon lands. Organizations representing these communities complained that small-scale mining operations, mainly by illegal gold miners, and logging activities cut residents off from their agricultural land, which often was connected to sacred cosmovisions, and threatened to drive these communities away from their traditional settlements and ways of life. Mercury runoff from mining activities and

riverbank erosion contaminated drinking water and threatened traditional foods sources, especially freshwater fish.

Maroon and Amerindian groups repeatedly petitioned the government and National Assembly for recognition of their lands and demanded the government cease issuing titles to third party developers. They further demanded that the government implement the rulings of the Inter-American Court on Human Rights in the 2008 case of the Saramaka People v. Suriname and the 2015 ruling of the Kalina and Lokono Peoples v. Suriname. Frustration regarding a lack of response from the government was said to have culminated in an attack on government facilities and private property in May, resulting in the death of two villagers.

Children

Child Abuse: The law prohibited child abuse, but the government did not enforce the law effectively. Children suffered a high rate of physical and mental abuse. According to the most recent (2018) UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 88 percent of children ages two to 14 suffered either physical or mental abuse. In rural areas, the rate was even higher, at 92 percent. A 2022 study showed that while an estimated 70,000 children encountered some form of abuse each year, only 400 cases were reported.

To avoid intimidation by perpetrators, children could testify in special chambers at legal proceedings. The Youth Affairs Office continued to raise

awareness regarding sexual abuse, drugs, and alcohol through a weekly television program. The Youth Support Hotline, which received government support, maintained a 24-hour service and social media presence. The hotline provided children confidential advice and aid. UNICEF trained government officials on children's rights. The Ministry of Justice and Police operated three child protection centers in different parts of the country.

With the support of UNICEF, the Academic Hospital Paramaribo maintained a social pediatric unit for abused children. The unit provided child victims of abuse with medical, social, and psychological guidance and worked with authorities to identify abusers.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: Parental permission to marry was required until the age of 21. The marriage law set the minimum age of marriage at 15 for girls and 17 for boys, provided parents of the parties agreed to the marriage. Children in certain tribal communities often married at an age younger than that set by the law. The government did not enforce the law effectively.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibited the grooming, use of children for commercial sexual exploitation, including sex trafficking, the sale of children, offering or procuring a child for commercial child sexual exploitation, and practices related to child pornography. Authorities investigated all reported abuses. While the legal age of sexual consent was 14, the law prohibited the sexual exploitation of a person younger than 18.

Criminal law penalized persons responsible for recruiting children into commercial sex and provided penalties of up to six years' imprisonment and a significant fine. The law also prohibited child pornography, which carried a maximum penalty of six years' imprisonment and a fine. Lack of economic opportunities led to an increasing number of adolescent children trafficked for sex, sometimes by their parents, to support the family or to pay for education. One NGO reported commercial sexual exploitation of children as young as 14.

Antisemitism

There was a Jewish community of approximately 100 persons. There were no reports of antisemitic incidents or discrimination.

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 that criminalized consensual same-sex sexual conduct. There were no reports of seemingly neutral laws being

applied disproportionately to LGBTQI+ persons.

Violence and Harassment: Activists stated there were few official reports of violence against LGBTQI+ persons, primarily due to fear of retribution. Authorities investigated and prosecuted reported cases of violence against LGBTQI+ persons, but the LGBTQI+ community alleged authorities did not take all complaints filed by the LGBTQI+ persons seriously.

Discrimination: The law prohibited discrimination and hate speech based on sexual orientation, specifically protecting the LGBTQI+ community. Violations were punishable by a fine or prison sentence of up to one year. The law did not set standards for determining what constituted such discrimination or hate speech. Same-sex couples could not marry, since the civil code recognized only marriages between a man and a woman. In January, the Constitutional Court upheld the existing law. The law on retirement benefits specifically excluded same-sex couples from benefits granted to heterosexual couples. There were reports that members of the LGBTQI+ community faced discrimination in housing and employment.

Within the LGBTQI+ community, the transgender community faced the greatest stigmatization and discrimination. Societal discrimination varied depending on location, as discrimination in rural districts was far more pervasive than in the city. In certain communities, young persons also experienced discrimination when coming out.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: A 2022 court ruling ordered the Civil Registration Office to register the name and gender change of a transgender person in the country's official registry. While the ruling set a precedent, changes to the official registries could be implemented only through amendment of the civil code, which did not occur during the year.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: There were no reported cases of so-called conversion therapy to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity or expression, nor were there 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 legal restrictions on freedom of expression, association, or peaceful assembly related to LGBTQI+ matters.

Persons with Disabilities

No laws specifically prohibited discrimination against persons with physical or mental disabilities. No law or program required access to buildings for persons with disabilities. There was also no law that required government information and communication to be provided in accessible formats.

Persons with disabilities were eligible to receive general health benefits, but the process was often cumbersome. Access to other government services was also difficult and often inadequate to meet the needs of persons with

disabilities. Persons with disabilities experienced discrimination when applying for jobs and services. A judge could rule to deny a person with a cognitive disability the right to vote, to take part in business transactions, or to sign legal agreements.

Children with disabilities attended school at a far lower rate than their peers without a disability. There was secondary and technical education for deaf and hard-of-hearing persons, but not for those with visual disabilities. The Foundation for the Blind taught braille and life skills to persons with low vision.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Persons with HIV and AIDS experienced discrimination in employment, housing, and medical services. Medical treatment was free for persons with HIV or AIDS covered under government insurance, but private insurers did not cover such treatment. NGOs reported discriminatory testing and subsequent denial of assistance for persons with HIV or AIDS who applied for housing assistance from the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective

Bargaining

The law provided for the right of workers to form and join unions of their choice without previous authorization or excessive requirements, the right to bargain collectively, and the right to strike. The law prohibited antiunion discrimination, required that workers terminated for union activity be reinstated, and prohibited employer interference in union activities. Labor laws did not cover undocumented foreign workers.

The government effectively enforced applicable laws involving the private sector. Penalties were commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights, such as discrimination, and penalties were sometimes applied against violators.

In isolated cases, private employers refused to bargain under or recognize collective bargaining rights, but the unions usually pressured the employers to negotiate. There were some reports that companies exploited legislative gaps and hired more contract employees than direct-hire staff to perform core business functions to cut costs.

The government itself (the largest employer in the country) was not bound by these laws, since it deemed labor laws applied only to private employees, not civil servants.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *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 that was above the poverty income level. In the private sector, most unions were able to negotiate wage increases. The National Wage Council, which included representatives from the government, employers, and unions, annually advised the government on a minimum hourly wage.

Work above 45 hours per week on a regular basis required government permission, which was routinely granted. The law required premium pay for such overtime work, prohibited excessive overtime, required a 24-hour rest period per week, and stipulated paid annual holidays. Overtime was generally limited to four hours per day, for a maximum 12-hour workday.

During the holiday seasons, the retail sector had a blanket permit allowing for work up to 15 hours a day, including seven hours of overtime per week.

Occupational Safety and Health: The government set occupational safety and health (OSH) standards that generally were current and appropriate for the main industries in the country. OSH experts did not actively identify unsafe conditions. Larger employers had their own OSH staff, who set safety standards. Workers in the formal sector could remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, and authorities effectively protected employees in this situation. Workers in the informal sector were not able to remove themselves from these situations without risk to their employment.

The International Labor Organization noted an increasing number of serious or fatal occupational accidents. Most fatal occupational accidents were in the mining sector. Workers in the informal sector, particularly in small-scale mining, often were exposed to dangerous conditions and hazardous substances such as mercury.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: Inspectors in the Occupational Health and Safety Division in the Ministry of Labor did not effectively enforce wage, hour, and OSH laws. Penalties for violations of relevant labor laws were commensurate with similar crimes, but those penalties were not always applied against violators.

The number of labor inspectors was not sufficient to enforce compliance with labor laws. Inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions.

Reliable information was not available, but observers estimated 15 percent of the working-age population worked in the informal economy, where there was limited enforcement of labor laws. In some areas, particularly the interior of the country, enforcement was nonexistent.