

# Killer Robots: UN Vote Should Spur Action on Treaty

*Guterres Should Seek to Tackle Autonomous Weapons Systems*  
Countries that approved the first-ever United Nations General Assembly resolution on “killer robots” should promote negotiations on a new international treaty to ban and regulate these weapons, Human Rights Watch said today. Autonomous weapons systems select and apply force to targets based on sensor processing rather than human inputs.

On December 22, 2023, 152 countries voted in favor of the General Assembly resolution on the dangers of lethal autonomous weapons systems, while four voted no, and 11 abstained. General Assembly Resolution 78/241 acknowledges the “serious challenges and concerns” raised by “new technological applications in the military domain, including those related to artificial intelligence and autonomy in weapons systems.”

“The General Assembly reso-



lution on autonomous weapons systems stresses the urgent need for the international community to deal with the dangers raised by removing human control from the use of force,” said Mary Wareham, arms advocacy director at

Human Rights Watch. “The resolution’s wide support shows that governments are prepared to take action, and they should move forward on a new international treaty without delay.”

Some autonomous weapons

systems have existed for years, but the types, duration of operation, geographical scope, and environment in which such systems operate have been limited. However, technological advances are spurring the development of autonomous weapons systems that operate without meaningful human control, delegating life-and-death decisions to machines. The machine rather than the human operator would determine where, when, or against what force is applied.

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The resolution asks UN Secretary-General António Guterres to seek the views of countries and other stakeholders on ways to address the challenges and concerns raised by autonomous weapons systems “from humanitarian, legal, security, technological and ethical perspectives,” and reflect those views in a report to the General Assembly by





September 2024.

The resolution adds an agenda item on “lethal autonomous weapons systems” to the provisional agenda of the UN General Assembly in 2024, providing a platform for states to pursue action to address this issue. The General Assembly provides an inclusive and accessible forum in which any UN member state can contribute. Tackling the killer robots challenge under its auspices would allow greater consideration of concerns that have been overlooked in discussions held to date, including ethical perspectives, international human rights law, proliferation, and impacts on global security and regional and international stability, including the risk of an arms race and lowering the threshold for conflict, Human Rights Watch said.

The countries voting against the resolution were: Belarus, India, Mali, and Russia. Those abstaining were: China, Iran, Israel, Madagascar, North Korea, Niger, Saudi Arabia, South Sudan, Syria, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates. Of these states, China, India, Iran, Israel, and Türkiye have been investing heavily in military applications of artificial intelligence and related technologies to develop air, land,

and sea-based autonomous weapons systems.

Austria put forward the resolution with 42 co-sponsoring states at the UN General Assembly’s First Committee on Disarmament and International Security, where it passed an initial vote on November 1, by 164 votes in

February, more than 30 countries from Latin America and the Caribbean endorsed the Belén Communiqué, acknowledging the need “to promote the urgent negotiation of an international legally binding instrument, with prohibitions and regulations with regard to autonomy in



favor, five against, and eight abstentions.

More than 100 countries regard a new treaty on autonomous weapons systems with prohibitions and restrictions as necessary, urgent, and achievable, and during 2023, many states and international organizations have reiterated their support for this objective.

weapons systems.” In September, 15 Caribbean states endorsed a CARICOM declaration on the human impacts of autonomous weapons at a meeting in Trinidad and Tobago.

On October 5, Secretary-General Guterres and International Committee of the Red Cross President Mirjana

Spoljaric issued a joint appeal for UN member states to negotiate a new international treaty by 2026 to ban and regulate autonomous weapons systems. Most treaty proponents have called for prohibitions on autonomous systems that by their nature operate without meaningful human control or that target people, as well as regulations that ensure all other autonomous weapons systems cannot be used without meaningful human control. Talks on lethal autonomous weapons systems have been held at the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) in Geneva since May 2014, but have failed to deliver a substantive outcome. The main reason for the lack of progress under the CCW is that its member countries rely on a consensus approach to decision-making, which means a single country can reject a proposal, even if every other country agrees to it. A handful of major military powers have exploited this to repeatedly block proposals to negotiate a legally binding instrument.

On November 17, states at the CCW agreed to meet for up to 20 days across 2024 and 2025 to “consider and formulate, by consensus, a set of elements of an instrument, without prejudging its nature.” The agreement does not mandate states to negotiate and adopt a

new CCW protocol.

“Technological change is rapidly advancing a future of automated killing that needs to be stopped,” Wareham said. “To safeguard humanity, all governments should support the urgent negotiation of a new international treaty to prohibit and restrict autonomous weapons

# Israel: Gaza Workers Held Incommunicado for Weeks



## Release Information on Detained Gaza Workers

Israeli authorities held thousands of workers from Gaza in incommunicado detention for several weeks following the October 7 attacks, subjecting at least some of them to inhumane and degrading conditions, Human Rights Watch said. Thousands more remain stranded in the occupied West Bank without valid legal status and vulnerable to arrest.

Those detained after October 7 were held by Israeli authorities in Israel and the West Bank, some of whom were reportedly interrogated on alleged links to, or knowledge of, the attacks. On November 3, over 3,000 Palestinian workers were released from detention and transferred to Gaza. Israeli authorities have yet to state the total numbers of workers from

Gaza in Israel on October 7, or the number of workers who were detained or remain detained. Israeli authorities have not disclosed if any workers from Gaza were charged with any crime.

"Israeli authorities detained thousands of workers for weeks without charge in incommunicado detention, subjecting at least some to humiliating ill-treatment," said Michelle Randhawa, senior refugee and migrant rights officer at Human Rights Watch. "The search for perpetrators and abettors of the October 7 attacks does not justify abusing workers who had been granted permits to work in Israel."

The October 7 Hamas-led attacks killed an estimated 1,200 people, mostly civilians, according to Israeli authorities.

More than 21,600 Palestinians have been killed, including more than 8,500 children, during the hostilities, according to Gaza authorities.

An estimated 18,500 workers from Gaza had permits to work in Israel on October 7, though it is unclear how many were in Israel that day. To get permits, applicants from Gaza underwent stringent security evaluations.

On December 19 and 21, Human Rights Watch wrote to the Israeli military and Israel Prison Service with its findings asking for comment, but received no response, as of writing.

Human Rights Watch spoke to four workers from Gaza detained by Israeli authorities after October 7. Three workers were part of a small group released to the West Bank

before November 3, and one was released on November 3 to Gaza.

One man attempted to go to the West Bank after he realized his work permit was cancelled and deleted from Al Munasiq, the phone app where work permits are stored. He said he was stopped at a checkpoint on the way to the West Bank, blindfolded, hands tightly bound with zip ties, and taken first to Ofer prison, and then to an unknown second location. There, he said, "They [forced me to take] off all my clothes...and they took pictures of me....They beat me intensely, I was naked during this, it was humiliating. The worst part was when the dogs were attacking [me]. I was blindfolded and cuffed with metal shackles, I didn't know if the dogs were controlled by

someone or just left to attack me, I was terrified.” He was interrogated and asked to identify his home on an aerial map of Gaza and was also asked about specific people. He was then released on November 3 at the Kerem Shalom crossing into Gaza.

Another man said Israeli police in Rahat, a city in southern Israel, arrested him and other workers from Gaza after the October 7 attacks and took them to an army base in Ofakim, Israel.

[The Israeli forces] “made us undress,” he said. “[We were] completely naked. They handed us Pampers to wear and thin white overalls.... We stayed blindfolded and cuffed [with zip ties on our hands and feet] for 10 days... We kept asking why we are detained. We never got an answer, only verbal assaults and death threats.”

He said he was beaten for hours, then dragged on gravel face down and attached to a wall or fence by his cuffed hands, and then beaten again: “Every time I fell on the ground I was forced to stand up, and again more beatings and I fell on the ground. With every beating and fall the plastic zip ties on my hands became tighter and more painful.”

He was then transferred to Ofer prison where he spent another four or five days until he was released into the West Bank.

Another man who worked in Rahat said he and other workers were arrested and taken to the Rahat police station on or around October 9. While blindfolded with their hands zip-tied behind their backs, “Israeli forces constantly cursed at us...and threatened to kill us.... We were held for 12 hours. We were not allowed water or [to use] the bathroom.”

Israeli forces also transferred

him to Ofer prison, where he said he was interrogated about Hamas in Gaza. On October 22, Israeli authorities released him to Palestinian Red Crescent paramedics, who took him by ambulance to the Ramallah Public Hospital, where staff treated his zip tie wounds. Human Rights Watch saw the scars on his wrists.

The Israeli military spokesperson confirmed to Haaretz two Gaza workers, one with cancer, one with diabetes, died in Israeli custody, saying, “The two died due to [...] complex

can’t get any more incommunicado than this.”

On October 23, six human rights organizations in Israel filed an urgent petition with Israel’s High Court, which stated Israeli authorities had refused to provide any information about where workers were being detained, under what law, and for how long.

On November 2, Gisha and HaMoked submitted a second urgent petition to Israel’s High Court stating that “the detainees were being held...without access to legal

viewed two brothers who had similar accounts of being blindfolded, beaten, and held without any communication with either their families or lawyers.

On November 9, the Israeli government published an emergency regulation on the “detention and deportation of unlawful residents of [Gaza].” The regulation states that Gaza workers no longer have a legal basis for being in Israel – since Israeli authorities canceled their work permits – and will be held in custody until removal. While the regulation sets time limits on detention, it also allows for extensions based on security needs.

The situation of the thousands of workers from Gaza who fled or were released to the West Bank remains unclear. Many are living in temporary shelters provided by the Palestinian Authority and nongovernmental organizations. There are reports from late November that Israeli Defense Forces have arrested workers from Gaza who had been sheltering in private homes.

On November 10, Israel, in coordination with the Palestinian Authority, transferred another group of 982 workers from Gaza who had been sheltering in the West Bank to Gaza via the Kerem Shalom crossing.

On November 28, Israeli authorities released 300 Palestinian workers to Gaza via the Kerem Shalom crossing. According to Osnat Cohen-Lifshitz, the head of Gisha’s legal department, these workers were released from the Anatot military base.

“Israeli authorities should disclose how many workers from Gaza were in Israel on October 7, how many were detained, whether any remain in detention and the basis for their detention,” Randhawa said. “They should investigate reports of abuse in detention and ensure the humane treatment of all detainees.”



medical condition[s] contracted before they arrived at the facilities. An investigation is being conducted into the circumstances of their death.”

Both men were arrested after October 7. One of the men Human Rights Watch interviewed said there was a cancer patient with him in Ofer who died after a few days in pain.

The Israeli human rights groups Gisha and HaMoked told Human Rights Watch that families in Gaza contacted them after October 7 when they stopped hearing from relatives with work permits in Israel. Both organizations requested permission to visit the detainees, speak to them by phone, and receive information on their judicial status, yet to no avail.

“We had no contact with the Gaza workers while they were detained,” said Nadya Daqqah, a lawyer from HaMoked. “It

representation” and allegedly subjected to “physical violence and psychological abuse, as well as...inhumane conditions.”

On November 2, the Israeli cabinet voted to return “Gaza workers who were in Israel on the day the war broke out” to Gaza. The next day, Israeli authorities released 3,026 Palestinian workers to Gaza via the Kerem Shalom crossing. On November 13, the Court rejected the petition, given the release of workers on November 3.

The released Palestinian workers gave media interviews, describing abuses and degrading conditions in detention, including being subjected to electric shocks, urinated on, attacked by dogs, as well as held for several days without food or water. Human Rights Watch was not able to verify these accounts. Gisha inter-

# Myanmar Filmmaker Sentenced to Life in Prison

## Release Shin Daewe and Others Unfairly Convicted



On January 10, a Myanmar military court closed to the public sentenced award-winning documentary filmmaker Shin Daewe to life in prison on trumped-up terrorism charges. Her conviction and harsh sentencing is the latest example of the Myanmar junta's relentless

persecution of the media. Police arrested Shin Daewe, 50, on October 15 after finding her with an aerial drone. Though drones are often used by journalists, their possession is illegal in Myanmar. She was charged under Myanmar's draconian Counterterrorism Law

of 2014 – which the junta has sharpened into a tool of oppression – for “financing and abetting terrorism,” and received the maximum punishment, characteristic of the junta-controlled courts.

Speaking to local media, Shin Daewe's husband said that the police held her for almost two weeks in an unknown location before transferring her to Yangon's Insein prison. He said that prison sources told him she appeared to have welts and bruises on her arms and stitches on her head, which suggested she was badly beaten in custody.

Other journalists have been convicted in summary trials since the junta seized power in a February 2021 coup. On September 6, 2023, a military tribunal

convicted a Myanmar Now journalist on various charges including sedition and sentenced him to 20 years in prison. Military authorities arrested Sai Zaw Thaïke, 40, in Rakhine State on May 26 as he covered the aftermath of Cyclone Mocha.

Like Shin Daewe, Sai Zaw Thaïke was held in Insein prison and denied access to legal representation, in violation of basic international due process standards. Both journalists were sentenced by military tribunals in closed proceedings.

In violation of the right to freedom of expression, Myanmar junta members

have repeatedly attacked the media for independent or critical reporting. The rights group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners reported that the military continues to wrongfully detain at least 61 journalists among the more than 19,900 people it has rounded up since the coup.

The unfair trials and cruel sentences handed down to Shin Daewe and Sai Zaw Thaïke are part of a broader effort to instill fear in the junta's critics, suppress independent coverage, and deny the reality of the military's serious and ongoing rights violations.

The junta should immediately release Shin Daewe, Sai Zae Thaïke, and others wrongfully convicted for their journalism, and allow a free media to flourish.



## Principled Diplomacy Critical to Uphold Human Rights Framework

she says there were also signs of hope, showing the possibility of a different path, and calls on governments to consistently uphold their human rights obligations.



Governments' double standards in applying the human rights framework not only put countless lives at risk, but they chip away at trust in the institutions responsible for enforcing and protecting rights, Human Rights Watch said. When governments are vocal in condemning the Israeli government's war crimes against civilians in Gaza but silent when it comes to Chinese government crimes against humanity in Xinjiang, or demand international prosecu-

tion for Russian war crimes in Ukraine while undermining accountability for US abuses in Afghanistan, they weaken the belief in the universality of human rights and the legitimacy of the laws designed to protect them.

Governments have found it easier to disregard human rights issues in the international arena in part because their violations of human rights at home have gone unchallenged by the international community, Human Rights Watch said. The human rights and humanitarian crises have led many to

United States and most European Union member countries' refusal to urge an end to the Israeli government's 16-year closure of Gaza.

Tradeoffs on human rights in the name of politics are clear when many governments fail to speak out about the Chinese government's intensifying repression. Chinese authorities' cultural persecution and arbitrary detention of a million Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims amount to crimes against humanity, yet many governments, including in predominantly Muslim countries,

Court (ICC).

In the US, President Joe Biden has shown little appetite to hold responsible human rights abusers who are key to his domestic agenda or those in China's sphere of influence. US allies like Saudi Arabia, India, and Egypt continue to violate the rights of their people on a massive scale.

The EU has circumvented its human rights obligations, pushing asylum seekers and migrants back to other countries or striking deals with abusive governments like Libya and Turkey to keep migrants

Sheikh Hasina's government ordered the arrest of over 10,000 opposition leaders and supporters ahead of the January 2024 election.

But just as these threats are interconnected, so too is the power of the human rights framework to protect people's freedom and dignity.

In a milestone decision, in November, the International Court of Justice ordered the Syrian government to prevent torture and other abuses. The Japanese parliament passed its first law to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people from "unfair discrimination." In Mexico, a civil society coalition persuaded Congress to pass a law establishing full legal capacity, benefiting millions of people with disabilities and older people.

In March, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and his children's rights commissioner for war crimes relating to the forcible transfer of children from occupied territories of Ukraine to Russia. Brazil's Supreme Court upheld all Indigenous peoples' rights to their traditional lands, one of the most effective barriers against deforestation in the Amazon.

And in November, the United Kingdom's highest court unanimously found that Rwanda is not a safe third country for the government to send asylum seekers, striking down an agreement that effectively shifted the UK's asylum responsibilities to Rwanda.

"Human rights crises around the world demonstrate the urgency of applying long-standing and mutually agreed principles of international human rights law everywhere," Hassan said. "Principled diplomacy, by which governments center their human rights obligations in their relations with other countries, can influence oppressive conduct and have a meaningful impact for people whose rights are being violated."



question the effectiveness of the human rights framework, when abusive governments are able to benefit from the lukewarm endorsement of a rights approach by more democratic and rights-respecting governments, Human Rights Watch said. Civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and human rights defenders can help to re-establish the human rights framework as the roadmap to building thriving, inclusive societies.

Many governments that condemned Hamas' war crimes have been reserved in responding to those by the Israeli government. The unwillingness to call out Israeli government abuses follows from the

stay silent.

In Sudan, which descended into armed conflict in April 2023 when the two most powerful Sudanese generals began battling each other for power, the United Nations has failed to stop massive abuses against civilians, most notably in the Darfur region. The UN Security Council closed its political mission in Sudan at the insistence of the Sudanese government, ending what little remained of the UN's in-country capacity to protect civilians and publicly report on the rights situation. It has also done nearly nothing to tackle the Sudanese government's intransigence in cooperating with the International Criminal

out. Democratic governments in the Asia-Pacific region, including Japan, South Korea, and Australia consistently deprioritize human rights in the name of assuring military alliances and trade.

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's democracy has slid toward autocracy, with authorities targeting minorities, tightening repression, and dismantling independent institutions.

In Tunisia, President Kais Saied has eliminated checks and balances. El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele has manipulated high levels of crime for a security crackdown to grab and consolidate power. In Bangladesh, Prime Minister

# Asia: Regional Leadership Needed on Human Rights

## Worsening Repression Puts Rights at Risk at Home and Abroad



Afghan refugees return to Afghanistan from Pakistan, in Torkham, Afghanistan, November 3, 2023. (Top Right) Homes destroyed after airstrikes and shelling in Mung Lai Hkyet displacement camp in Laiza, Myanmar, October 10, 2023. (Bottom left) A relative of political violence victims during a protest in Dhaka, Bangladesh, November 28, 2023. (Bottom right) A woman places a candle between pictures of victims of alleged enforced disappearances during a gathering of relatives and supporters in observance of All Souls Day in Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines, November 2, 2023. © 2023 AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi / 2023 AP Photo/ 2023 Kazi Salahuddin Razu/NurPhoto via

AP / 2023 ROLEX DELA PENA/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock (Bangkok) – Increasing repression by governments in Asia is negatively affecting human rights locally and internationally, Human Rights Watch said today in releasing its World Report 2024. In 2023, the Chinese government continued to commit crimes against humanity against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang, and increased abusive policies and practices across the country. North Korea and Vietnam escalated repression at home. India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Bangladesh, all of which have elections scheduled in 2024, heightened attacks on democratic institutions and the rule of law.

“The threats abusive governments in Asia pose to human rights domestically and internationally demand bold new approaches from rights-respecting governments and democratic institutions,” said Elaine Pearson, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “People throughout Asia are seeing their rights and freedoms trampled or ignored. Stronger leadership is needed to protect and promote human rights in the region, or the situation will only grow worse.” In the 740-page World Report 2024, its 34th edition, Human Rights Watch reviews human rights practices in more than 100 countries. In her introductory essay, Executive Director Tirana Hassan says that 2023 was a consequential year not

only for human rights suppression and wartime atrocities but also for selective government outrage and transactional diplomacy that carried profound costs for the rights of those not in on the deal. But she says there were also signs of hope, showing the possibility of a different path, and calls on governments to consistently uphold their human rights obligations.

Asia, unlike Europe, Africa, and the Americas, lacks a meaningful human rights charter or regional institution to safeguard human rights standards. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a political body, has repeatedly proven incapable of addressing regional human rights crises, most conspicuously with the crisis in Myanmar.

Democratic systems in Asia remained under assault throughout 2023. After Thailand’s May elections, the top-vote getting party was blocked from forming a government by a military-appointed senate and other mechanisms created under a military junta-drafted constitution. An



electoral exercise in Cambodia in July could not even be considered an election, as the government blocked the main opposition party from participating. Ahead of 2024 elections in Bangladesh, authorities intensified attacks the political opposition, arresting over 10,000 dissidents and opposition members.

In Vietnam and in India, authorities expanded arbitrary arrests and prosecutions of dissidents and critics of the government, including environmental activists. In the Philippines, union leaders, journalists, and activists remained targets of often deadly anti-communist “red-tagging.” The long-time Cambodian leader, Hun Sen, passed on his position as prime minister to his son Hun Manet, who did not ease the severe restrictions on civic society groups and independent media. North Korea’s totalitarian government kept its border sealed and almost entirely cut off its population from the rest of the world, worsening the country’s dire human rights situation. In Afghanistan, the Taliban entrenched their severe rights restrictions, particularly on women and girls, in the face of a humanitarian crisis.

Several governments in Asia

engaged in repressive conduct outside their borders in 2023. The Chinese government intimidated people and institutions in other countries. Asylum seekers in Thailand faced threats of forced depor-

Canada, a claim the Indian government denied. In November, US authorities indicted a man for plotting with an Indian government official to assassinate a Sikh activist in the US.

rights and declined to impose or enforce sanctions on abusive Southeast Asian governments. South Korea, which was elected to the Security Council for 2024-2025, likewise, did little to stand up for human rights in other Asian countries. Australia has been much slower than other Western governments to use targeted sanctions on human rights abusers, most notably with abusive Chinese officials sanctioned by other governments.

India’s government has entirely abandoned its past practice of supporting human rights promotion in neighbors, such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Indonesia’s emergence in recent years as a more rights-respecting country has not resulted in its government championing human rights or democratic rule elsewhere.

“Established democracies in Asia – notably India, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea – have failed to provide



tation to Myanmar, China, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. In September, the government of Canada reported that agents of the Indian government were involved in the assassination of a separatist Sikh activist in

Democratic governments in Asia did little to champion or support human rights standards regionally or internationally. Japan, on the United Nations Security Council, remained relatively silent on

leadership to advance human rights in the region or the world,” Pearson said. “They need to realize that repression outside their borders affects human rights at home.”

# Politicized Courts, Muzzled Media as Türkiye Reaches 100

## Erdogan Re-elected as Rule of Law Crisis Deepens

Politically motivated court decisions and signs of power struggles in the justice system following the re-election of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to up-end Türkiye's rule of law framework during 2023, Human Rights Watch said today in its World Report 2024. In Türkiye's centennial year, its media was subjected to censorship and independent news outlets face arbitrary fines and prosecution.

Erdogan won a third term as president, in the May 28 election, following a May 14 victory for his Justice and Development Party-led coalition in the parliamentary elections.

"Erdogan's victory at the polls was rapidly followed by power struggles in the judiciary and politicized decisions by courts, demonstrating the deep erosion of human rights and the rule of law in the country," said Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "Türkiye's human rights record in its centennial year included a muzzled media and political opponents routinely targeted and punished."

In the 740-page World Report

2024, its 34th edition, Human Rights Watch reviews human

of Cassation doubled down on its defiance of the European

protest and abuse of criminal proceedings against journal-



rights practices in more than 100 countries. In her introductory essay, Executive Director Tirana Hassan says that 2023 was a consequential year not only for human rights suppression and wartime atrocities but also for selective government outrage and transactional diplomacy that carried profound costs for the rights of those not in on the deal. But she says there were also signs of hope, showing the possibility of a different path, and calls on governments to consistently uphold their human rights obligations.

In September, Türkiye's Court

Court of Human Rights by upholding the groundless convictions of the human rights defender Osman Kavala and four others for their alleged role in the 2013 protests over development plans for Istanbul's Gezi Park. The Court of Cassation flouted a Constitutional Court order by blocking the release of a Gezi trial defendant, Can Atalay, from prison to take up the parliamentary seat he won in the May elections.

Other actions during 2023 causing concern have been restrictions on the media, online censorship, bans on

ists, human rights defenders, politicians, social media users and others. Incidents of police and gendarmerie torture and ill-treatment increased in the aftermath of the deadly February 6, 2023 earthquakes in southeast provinces of the country. The government used hateful rhetoric against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the run-up to the May elections, prolonged the detention of Kurdish politicians on politically motivated charges, and increased deportations of refugees and migrants.

# UK Government Severely Eroded Human Rights in 2023

## Stop Curtailing Rights at Home; End Foreign Policy Double Standards

The United Kingdom government's policies and practices both severely eroded domestic human rights protections and undermined its efforts to promote human rights globally in 2023, Human Rights Watch said today in its World Report 2024.

"The UK had another dismal year for human rights in 2023," said Yasmine Ahmed, UK director at Human Rights Watch. "The government continued its assault on fundamental rights in the UK, including to protest and seek asylum, which alongside the application of double standards in its foreign policy, undermined its efforts to promote human rights globally."

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and wartime atrocities but also for selective government outrage and transactional diplomacy that carried profound costs for the rights of those not in on the deal. But she says there were also signs

of hope, showing the possibility of a different path, and calls on governments to consistently uphold their human rights obligations.

In 2023, the UK government weakened basic freedoms, like

Public Order Act, further criminalizing people's right to peaceful protest; undermining freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association; and limiting workers' strikes. The law came amid an ongoing crackdown on people protesting the government's increasingly regressive climate change policies.

In July, the UK government adopted the widely condemned Illegal Migration Act, which bans access to asylum and undermines modern slavery and trafficking protections for anyone who arrives "irregularly" to the UK. The government continued to defend its controversial asylum deal with Rwanda before the Supreme Court, after the Court of Appeal ruled that Rwanda was not a safe third country to send asylum seekers to. In



people's right to protest, with new legislation. The UK's pursuit of its plan to transfer asylum seekers to Rwanda and the introduction of the Illegal Migration Act attacked the rights of refugees and asylum seekers and generally had a corrosive influence on international norms and standards.

In April, the government passed the



November, the Supreme Court confirmed that the UK-Rwanda scheme was unlawful because Rwanda was not deemed a safe third country. The government reacted to the judgment by vowing to adopt emergency legislation to confirm Rwanda as a safe country and agree to a treaty with Rwanda to replace the existing memorandum of understanding.

Despite an ongoing cost of living crisis, the UK government failed to adopt policies to ensure people's rights to social security and an adequate standard of living, including food and adequate housing.

The UK authorities also fail to adequately address racial inequalities and discrimination. The UK government apologized in 2018 after thousands of Black Britons belonging to the Windrush generation were deported, detained, and denied their rights because of repeated policy failings by the Home Office. Yet the government continues to fail these people, who still face serious difficulties accessing a complex and inaccessible compensation program, and backed away in 2023 from some of the recommendations from an independent inquiry into the

scandal. The United Nations Working Group on People of African Descent condemned these failings during its UK visit in January 2023. The UK government continued

with many Chagossians now

residing in the UK. There are current negotiations between the UK and Mauritius about the sovereignty of the islands, but the Chagossians have not



to fail to remedy the forced eviction of the entire Chagossian people from their homeland in the Chagos Archipelago islands, who they forcibly displaced over 50 years ago, in complicity with the United States government,

been effectively consulted. The UK has refused to provide them with full reparations, including their right to return. On the world stage, the government used its position and influence to call out abuses in Sudan, Ukraine, Iran, Belarus,

and elsewhere. But it was willing to flout its international legal obligations and apply double standards when it suited the government's purposes. Following the October 7, 2023 Hamas-led attack on Israel, the UK government rightly condemned Hamas' deliberate killings of civilians and taking of hostages, which amount to war crimes. However, it has failed to call out Israel's collective punishment of the people of Gaza by cutting electricity, water, fuel, and food, which are also war crimes, nor signal any concern with Israel's incessant aerial bombardment that has killed thousands of children and other civilians and reduced large parts of neighborhoods to rubble. The hostilities gave rise to an increase in reports of anti-semitism and Islamophobic incidents in the UK, according to civil society groups and the police in London.

Since signing its asylum deal with Rwanda, the UK's posi-

tion on Rwanda's human rights record appears compromised, since it has failed to press Rwanda to end its assistance to the M23 armed group, which is committing atrocities in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

# UAE: Hosting COP28 Amid Longstanding Repression

## ‘Greenwashing’ Abuses; Fossil Fuel Expansion

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) hosted the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) in 2023 and used it to burnish its image despite pushing for fossil fuel expansion and maintaining a zero-tolerance policy toward dissent, Human Rights Watch

human rights defenders, activists, academics, and lawyers. The UAE’s closure of civic space limited meaningful participation of activists in climate negotiations. The COP28 acknowledged the need to transition away from fossil fuels, but fell short of a clear

global efforts to confront the climate crisis and protect human rights.”

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uphold their human rights obligations.

The Emirati government’s sustained assault on rights and freedom over the last decade has led to the complete closure of civic space, severe restrictions of freedom of expression, both online and offline, and the



said today in its World Report 2024.

The UAE, one of the world’s largest oil producers and per capita greenhouse gas emitters, hosted COP28 in November and December 2023 despite the country’s draconian repression of peaceful dissent, laws that prohibit free association and assembly and deny the right to privacy, and unjust imprisonment of scores of

and time-bound commitment to phase out fossil fuels as the main drivers of the climate crisis.

“The UAE tried using COP28 to improve its image internationally to conceal the government’s deeply repressive policies and push to expand its fossil fuel production” said Joey Shea, UAE and Saudi Arabia researcher at Human Rights Watch. “This undermines

Tirana Hassan says that 2023 was a consequential year not only for human rights suppression and wartime atrocities but also for selective government outrage and transactional diplomacy that carried profound costs for the rights of those not in on the deal. But she says there were also signs of hope, showing the possibility of a different path, and calls on governments to consistently

criminalization of peaceful dissent. The UAE authorities deploy advanced surveillance technologies to monitor public space, internet activity, and people’s phones and computers.

The UAE’s cybercrimes law is used to silence dissidents, journalists, activists, and critics. Emirati authorities block and censor online content perceived to be critical. UAE law

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# COP28UAE

## DUBAI 2023

H.E. Dr. Sultan Al Jaber  
COP 28 President

also criminalizes consensual nonmarital sex, “sodomy” with an adult male, and abortions under overly broad “morality offenses” that disproportionately affects women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

Personal status laws also discriminate against Emirati mothers, granting the father default guardianship of children. Emirati women remain unable to pass their nationality to their children on an equal basis with men.

While the UAE relies heavily on migrant workers, they experience serious labor abuses like wage theft, exorbitant recruitment fees, restrictions on job mobility, and passport confiscation. The UAE’s abusive kafala (visa sponsorship) system underpins these abuses as it ties migrant workers’ visas to their employers.

UAE-based migrant workers from climate-vulnerable countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan are exposed to escalating climate risks, especially when working in UAE’s extreme heat without adequate protection.

The UAE’s fossil fuel production and use contributes to toxic air pollution that creates major health risks for UAE citizens and residents and drives the global climate crisis.

As of March, Emirati authorities continued to hold at least 51 Emirati prisoners beyond their sentences on baseless counterterrorism justifications. These prisoners have been imprisoned as part of the grossly unfair “UAE94” mass trial of 69 government critics

Mansoor was sentenced by an Emirati state security court to 20 years in prison and a fine following more than a year in pretrial isolation detention and a grossly unfair trial.

In December 2023, the Emirati government brought new charges against 87 people,

including solitary confinement for at least 5 months and forced to sign documents confessing to committing “terrorist acts” ahead of the first hearing on December 7.

In May, UAE authorities successfully extradited an Emirati-Turkish citizen,



convicted on charges that violate their rights to free expression and association.

Ahmed Mansoor, UAE’s last Emirati human rights defender working publicly at the time of his arrest in March 2017, remains arbitrarily imprisoned for charges based on his human rights advocacy.

including Mansoor and UAE94 prisoners, under its counterterrorism law based on the establishment and support of the Justice and Dignity Committee, an independent advocacy group, in 2010. Informed sources and family members said that the defendants were held in incommuni-

Khalaf Abdul Rahman al-Romaithi, from Jordan. Al-Romaithi, whose family has not heard from nor know his whereabouts since May 9, is at serious risk of arbitrary detention, unfair trial, and possibly torture in the UAE.

# Syria: Abuses Persist Amid Economic Crisis

## Efforts for International Accountability Advance

In 2023, civilians in Syria faced another year of grave abuses perpetrated by the Syrian government and other parties to the conflict as the country grappled with an acute economic crisis, Human Rights Watch said today in its World Report 2024.

lapse, a devastating earthquake, and ongoing abuses by warring parties, civilians in Syria are increasingly in need of protection and humanitarian aid,” said Adam Coogle, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “No country should consider

also for selective government outrage and transactional diplomacy that carried profound costs for the rights of those not in on the deal. But she says there were also signs of hope, showing the possibility of a different path, and calls on governments to consistently

equitably address a debilitating economic crisis brought on by the destruction of infrastructure and crises in neighboring countries, and the effects of expansive international sanctions on the economic rights of Syrians. Despite its failure to cease abuses or initiate

reforms, Arab states readmitted Syria to the Arab League.

In early September, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad abolished the notorious military field courts, where thousands of people are thought to have been sentenced to death without due process and referred all pending cases to the military judiciary, raising concerns that the decision may lead to the erasure of court records and other evidence related to enforced disappearances.

In Idlib, indiscriminate attacks by Syrian-Russian mili-



Across the country, Syrians are facing a severe humanitarian crisis, with over 90 percent living below the poverty line. Although Syria remains unsafe, and hostilities are on the rise, refugee hosting countries like Turkey and Lebanon continued unlawful deportations and large-scale returns of thousands of Syrians to different parts of the country.

“Pounded by economic col-

lapse, a devastating earthquake, and ongoing abuses by warring parties, civilians in Syria are increasingly in need of protection and humanitarian aid,” said Adam Coogle, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “No country should consider

returning refugees to Syria while unsafe conditions persist.” In the 740-page World Report 2024, its 34th edition, Human Rights Watch reviews human rights practices in more than 100 countries. In her introductory essay, Executive Director Tirana Hassan says that 2023 was a consequential year not only for human rights suppression and wartime atrocities but

uphold their human rights obligations.

In government-held areas of Syria, security forces continued to subject residents, including returning refugees, to arbitrary arrest, torture, enforced disappearances, harassment, and extortion, while millions could not find or afford enough quality food due to the Syrian government’s diversion of aid, failure to

tary forces on civilians and critical civilian infrastructure persisted in 2023, including use of prohibited weapons such as cluster munitions and incendiary weapons.

In July, the UN Security Council failed to renew the cross-border aid mechanism for Syria when Russia vetoed a resolution on its continuation, closing a nine-year-old avenue for delivering humanitarian

assistance to non-government-controlled parts of northwest Syria without the Syrian government's consent.

Turkish Armed Forces stepped up attacks on areas in the northeast under the control of Kurdish-led forces, destroying critical infrastructure and resulting in water and electricity disruptions for millions of people.

The Syrian Democratic Forces

(SDF), a US-backed Kurdish-led armed group that controls much of Northeast Syria, continued to arbitrarily detain civilians, including journalists, according to a September 2023 UN report that also documented deaths in detention in Hasakeh and Raqqa central prisons.

Despite nearly 4,000 repatriations to about a dozen countries through mid-November

2023, the SDF and Asayish regional security forces continued to arbitrarily detain at least 60,000 ISIS suspects and family members from Syria and nearly 60 other countries, most of whom are children, in life-threatening, degrading, and often inhumane conditions.

On June 8, 2023, the Netherlands and Canada filed a case at the International Court of Justice alleging that

Syria is violating the International Convention Against Torture. The court held hearings in October on the Netherlands and Canada's request for provisional measures. On November 16, it issued its order, directing the Syrian government to take all measures within its power to prevent acts of torture and other abuses.

## Tunisia: Authoritarian Drift Erodes Rights

Tunisia experienced further regression in terms of human rights and the rule of law during 2023 in the absence of genuine checks and balances on

are more severe today than at any time since the revolution of 2011."

In the 740-page World Report 2024, its 34th edition, Human

Beginning in February, Tunisian authorities stepped up politically motivated arrests and prosecutions of opposition figures of various political ten-

least 27 lawyers faced civil or military prosecutions as of September.

The authorities have also used a recent cybercrime decree-law, which imposes heavy prison sentences for spreading "fake news" and "rumors" online, to arbitrarily detain, prosecute, or investigate at least 21 people for speech offenses, in one case before a military court.

After Saied made public comments in February linking undocumented Black African migrants to crime and a purported conspiracy to change Tunisia's demographics, Black African foreigners suffered a surge in attacks by Tunisian citizens.

Throughout the year, the Tunisian police, military, and national guard, including the coast guard, committed serious abuses against Black African migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, including beatings, use of excessive force, some cases of torture, arbitrary arrests and detention, collective expulsions to perilous border regions, and dangerous actions at sea during boat interceptions. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, some 2,000 migrants and asylum-seekers, including women and children, were expelled to Tunisia's borders with Libya and Algeria in July and August alone.



President Kais Saied's power, Human Rights Watch said today in its World Report 2024. The government has taken new steps to muzzle free speech, prosecute dissent, and crack down on migrants and asylum seekers.

"Over the past year, President Saied jailed dozens of his opponents and critics, fueled racism and xenophobia against Black migrants and refugees, and threatened the activities of civil society," said Salsabil Chellali, Tunisia director at Human Rights Watch. "The imprisoning of dissidents and the subjugation of the judiciary

Rights Watch reviews human rights practices in more than 100 countries. In her introductory essay, Executive Director Tirana Hassan says that 2023 was a consequential year not only for human rights suppression and wartime atrocities but also for selective government outrage and transactional diplomacy that carried profound costs for the rights of those not in on the deal. But she says there were also signs of hope, showing the possibility of a different path, and calls on governments to consistently uphold their human rights obligations.

dencies, lawyers, activists, and journalists. At least 40 opponents or individuals deemed critical of the authorities were behind bars as of December, with most of them accused of "conspiracy against state security" or dubious terrorism related charges, often merely for their peaceful speech or activism.

Tunisian authorities continued to undermine judicial independence by targeting lawyers for defending their clients or expressing their opinions, and ignoring a 2022 court order to reinstate judges arbitrarily dismissed by President Saied. At

# The Algorithms Too Few People Are Talking About

The November 2023 implosion of OpenAI—the creator of the viral artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot ChatGPT—has intensified debates over how AI should be governed. Just weeks before Sam Altman was fired and then quickly rehired as the company's CEO, the White House had announced new safety standards for developers of generative AI, the technology on which ChatGPT is based. Discussions about generative AI's risks also dominated the United Kingdom's first high-level summit on AI safety. And disagreement about what constraints should be placed on the rapidly developing technology nearly derailed the European Union's long-awaited regulation on AI.

This preoccupation with generative AI is overshadowing other forms of algorithmic decision-making that are already deeply embedded in society and the lessons they offer on regulating emerging technology. Some of the algo-

ritms that attract the least attention are capable of inflicting the most harm—for example, algorithms that are woven into the fabric of government services and dictate whether people can afford food, housing, and health care.

In the U.K., where Prime Minister Rishi Sunak recently warned that “humanity could lose control of AI completely,” the government has ceded con-

“self-service” by benefit claimants.

The ballooning costs of implementing Universal Credit have raised doubts about the government's promise of cost savings. This largely automated system is also making the process of claiming benefits and appealing errors more inflexible and burdensome for people already struggling with poverty.

U.K. civil society groups as well as my organization, Human Rights Watch, have found that the system relies on a means-testing algorithm that is prone to miscalculating people's income and underestimating how much cash support they need. Families that bear the brunt of the algorithm's faulty design are going hungry,

ments are turning to elaborate AI systems to detect whether people are defrauding the state, motivated by calls to reduce public spending as well as politicized narratives that benefits fraud is spiraling out of control. These systems tap into vast pools of personal and sensitive data, attempting to surface signs of fraud from peo-



falling behind on rent, and becoming saddled with debt. The human toll of automation's failures appears to be lost on Sunak, however, who has vowed that his government will not “rush to regulate” AI. Sunak has also hailed AI as the “answer” to “clamping down on benefit fraudsters,” but the experience of other European countries tells a different story. Across the continent, govern-

ment's national and ethnic origin, the languages they speak, and their family and employment histories, housing records, debt reports, and even romantic relationships.

These surveillance machines have not yielded the results governments have hoped for. Investigative leads flagged by Denmark's fraud detection algorithm make up only 13 percent of the cases that

Copenhagen authorities investigate. An algorithm that the Spanish government procured to assess whether workers are falsely claiming sick leave benefits suffers from high error rates—medical inspectors who are supposed to use it to investigate claims have questioned whether it is even needed at all.

More importantly, these technologies are excluding people from essential support and singling them out for investiga-

on a flawed algorithm that disproportionately flagged low-income families and ethnic minorities as fraud risks.

EU policymakers struck a deal on Dec. 8, 2023, to pass the Artificial Intelligence Act, but French President Emmanuel Macron has since voiced concern that the regulation could stymie innovation. Even if the deal holds, it is doubtful that the regulation will impose meaningful safeguards against discriminatory fraud detection

nating against vulnerable populations.

Harmful deployments of AI are also piling up in the United States, and legislative gridlock is stalling much-needed action. Many states, for example, are relying on facial recognition to verify applications for unemployment benefits, despite widespread reports that the technology has delayed or wrongly denied people access to support. More than two dozen states have also

help with.

Kevin De Liban, the Legal Aid lawyer who brought the lawsuit, told me that the switch to algorithmic assessments was bound to create hardship because many people did not have access to adequate support to begin with. When Arkansas rolled out the algorithm, it also reduced the weekly cap on home care support from 56 to 46 hours. “People with disabilities would struggle to live inde-



tion based on stereotypes about poverty and other discriminatory criteria. In France, a recent *Le Monde* investigation found that the country’s social security agency relies on a risk-scoring algorithm that is more likely to trigger audits of rent-burdened households, single parents, people with disabilities, and informal workers. In 2021, the Dutch government was forced to resign after revelations that tax authorities had wrongly accused as many as 26,000 parents of committing child benefits fraud, based

on a flawed algorithm that disproportionately flagged low-income families and ethnic minorities as fraud risks. Previous drafts of the regulation had proposed a vague ban on “general purpose” social scoring, invoking the specter of a dystopian future in which people’s lives are reduced to a single social score that controls whether they can board a plane, take out a loan, or get a job. This fails to capture how fraud risk scoring technologies currently work, which serve a more limited purpose but are still capable of depriving people of lifesaving support and discrimi-

nating against vulnerable populations. Harmful deployments of AI are also piling up in the United States, and legislative gridlock is stalling much-needed action.

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particular, federal agencies overseeing Medicaid, food assistance, and other benefits programs are required to draw up guidance on automating these programs in a manner that ensures transparency, due process and “equitable outcomes.”

What the order does not do, however, is impose red lines against applications of the technology that seem to be prone to abuse, such as facial recognition, predictive policing, and algorithmic risk assessments in criminal sen-

unacceptable risk to people’s rights. As EU policymakers finalize the language of the AI Act in the coming weeks, they have one last opportunity to tailor the regulation’s social scoring ban to AI-facilitated abuses in public services. A handful of U.S. cities have banned their government agencies from using facial recognition, but they remain the exception despite mounting evidence of the technology’s role in wrongful arrests.

These bans should also be considered when the risks posed

state for cutting her hours said she went hungry, sat in urine-soaked clothing, and missed medical appointments as a result. Despite additional safeguards, the overriding objective of the algorithm-assisted system remained the same: to reduce costs by cutting support.

For AI systems that raise manageable risks, meaningful regulation will require safeguards that prompt scrutiny of the policy choices that shape how these systems are designed and implemented. Well-intentioned

De Liban, the Legal Aid lawyer, told me that trying to fix the algorithm sometimes distracts from the need to fix the underlying policy problem. Algorithmic decision-making is predisposed to inflict harm if it is introduced to triage support in a benefits system that is chronically underfunded and set up to treat beneficiaries as suspects rather than rights-holders. By contrast, benefits automation is more likely to promote transparency, due process, and “equitable out-



tencing. Executive orders are also no substitute for legislation: Only Congress can grant federal authorities new powers and funding to regulate the tech industry, and only Congress can impose new restrictions on how states spend federal dollars on AI systems.

AI’s harm to public services offers a road map on how to meaningfully regulate the technology, and the costs of falling short. Perhaps the most critical learning is the need to set up no-go zones: bans on applications of AI that pose an

by AI cannot be sufficiently mitigated through due diligence, human oversight, and other safeguards. Arkansas’s disastrous rollout of an algorithm to allocate in-home care is a case in point. In response to legal challenges, the state established a new system that continued to rely on an algorithm to evaluate eligibility but required health department officials to check its assessments and modify them as needed. But arbitrary cuts to people’s home care hours persisted: A 71-year-old woman with disabilities who sued the

processes to reduce algorithmic bias or technical errors can distract from the need to tackle the structural drivers of discrimination and injustice. The catastrophic effects of the U.K.’s Universal Credit and Arkansas’s Medicaid algorithm are as much a consequence of austerity-driven cuts to the benefits system as they are of overreliance on technology. Spain’s sick leave monitoring algorithm, medical inspectors say, is hardly a solution to long-standing staff shortages they are experiencing.

comes” if it is rooted in long-term investments to increase benefit levels, simplify enrollment, and improve working conditions for caregivers and caseworkers.

Policymakers should not let hype about generative AI or speculation about its existential risks distract them from the urgent task of addressing the harms of AI systems that are already among us. Failing to heed lessons from AI’s past and present will doom us to repeat the same mistakes