

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2024

Authorities persisted in criminalizing the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. They conducted unfair mass trials of 57 Bangladeshi peaceful protesters and of 78 Emirati dissidents, leading to convictions and lengthy prison sentences. Pro-Palestinian expression was suppressed. The production of fossil fuels increased. Migrant workers were disproportionately affected by the outbreak of dengue fever caused by flooding.

Background

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) maintained strong economic relations with Israel amid the armed conflict in Gaza but ceased high-profile announcements of new joint commercial deals with Israel.

The presidency of the annual UN Conference of the Parties (COP) on climate change shifted from the chief executive of the UAE's state-owned Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) to the new host country, Azerbaijan.

In April, rare rainstorms produced record rainfall and flooding in several cities.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Authorities conducted mass arrests and a rushed mass trial of 57 Bangladeshis who peacefully protested the actions of their home government in several UAE cities on 19 July. On 20 July the Office of Public Prosecution announced that it was investigating the protests as crimes. On 21 July, the Federal Appeal Court in Abu Dhabi convicted and sentenced three Bangladeshi nationals to life in prison and 54 others to prison terms of 10 to 11 years.

According to the Emirati state news agency, the defendants "confessed" to involvement in "assembling in a public place for the purposes of rioting and undermining public order, and calling and inciting for such assemblies and marches". Footage of protests in several locations reviewed by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch did not show protesters engaging in any acts of violence, only peaceful gatherings, chanting and marching.

On 3 September the state news agency announced that President Mohamed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan had pardoned Bangladeshi nationals who "assembled and rioted" and ordered that their sentences be quashed and that they be deported to Bangladesh.

Unfair trials

In July, authorities concluded the mass trial of 78 Emirati dissidents – the vast majority of whom had been imprisoned since 2013 and previously convicted in another mass trial – with convictions and new prison sentences handed down to 53 defendants. Forty-three received life sentences.¹

The proceedings were shrouded in secrecy. Not a single court document, including the indictment and verdict, was made public. An Emirati lawyer involved in the trial described how authorities forbade all lawyers working on the case from sharing court documents with anyone, including their own clients. Authorities barred defence lawyers from having a copy of the judgment, which they could only view at government offices. Defendants and their families were not permitted to communicate during the trial, and families were banned from the courtroom. Only reporters working for the state news agency were permitted to enter the courthouse complex to cover the trial.

The mass trial of 57 Bangladeshis convicted of protesting was also grossly unfair. It was conducted in less than 24 hours with a single state-appointed defence lawyer.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Authorities used prolonged solitary confinement against prisoners in the mass trial of Emirati dissidents as a means of coercion and punishment. At hearings in late 2023 and early 2024, defendants, including prisoner of conscience Salim al-Shehhi, told the court that authorities had held them in solitary confinement for months to coerce them into making "confessions".

Freedom of expression

The UAE continued to criminalize the right to freedom of expression through multiple laws and to punish actual or perceived critics of the government.

In April, authorities expelled from the UAE a Palestinian instructor at the Abu Dhabi campus of New York University (NYU) because of his political views, expressed to his academic colleagues. In May, authorities arrested, detained and forcibly returned to his country of origin a foreign student who shouted, "Free Palestine!" at the NYU graduation ceremony. NYU administrators denied permission to students and faculty to hold events related to Palestine, suppressed pro-Palestinian expression at the graduation ceremony and warned staff that they could be punished under Emirati law if they criticized the university's administration.²

On 2 August the federal Office of Public Prosecution announced that, based on new "confessions", it was pursuing new criminal investigations against exiled Emiratis for "direct communication with international human rights organizations", among other "offences".

Irresponsible arms transfers

Amnesty International uncovered new visual evidence that UAE-manufactured armoured personnel carriers were being used by the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan, which have committed war crimes including ethnically motivated attacks on civilians.³

Right to a healthy environment

Rather than pursuing fossil fuel phase-out measures, the UAE continued to expand its oil production capacity through ADNOC, and to push the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries to authorize more Emirati exports. Expansion of oil production capacity was projected to continue into 2027. The Climate Action Tracker project ranked the UAE's climate policies and actions as "insufficient" to counter the threat of catastrophic climate change, noting that, despite progress, the UAE's emissions reduction plans relied heavily on carbon capture and storage, undermining the credibility of its 2050 net zero target.

A June report by the NGO Global Witness confirmed that the UAE's COP team had pursued fossil fuel deals for ADNOC while hosting the climate conference in 2023.

The Emirati government's approach to climate finance was to encourage private capital to pursue investments in climate adaptation projects in lower-income countries, with a profitable return expected for investors.

Migrant workers' rights

Flooding in April caused an outbreak of dengue fever. According to an investigation by the human rights organization FairSquare in July, the outbreak disproportionately affected migrant workers, who also struggled to access adequate healthcare and information. FairSquare found that, although the authorities had cleared main roads, dengue-breeding stagnant water remained for months in industrial areas where migrant workers live and work.

- ["UAE: Scores convicted in sham mass trial violating fundamental legal principles", 10 July ↗](#)
- ["New York University, UAE Authorities Quash Campus Freedom, 22 August ↗](#)
- ["New Weapons Fuelling the Sudan Conflict, 25 July ↗](#)

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