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– Country and Regional Issues

Delegations will find in the annex the EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World in 2015 – Country and Regional Issues, adopted by the Council at its 3484th meeting held on 20 September 2016.

**EU ANNUAL REPORT ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY
IN THE WORLD IN 2015**

Country and Regional Issues

(General Affairs Council, 20 September 2016)

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I. Candidate countries and potential candidates

The values on which the EU is founded, as set out in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, are reflected in the accession criteria. These essential conditions, which all candidate countries must satisfy to become a Member State, include the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, respect for the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities. The current enlargement agenda covers the countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey. The progress towards meeting these criteria is covered in depth in the European Commission's 2015 Enlargement Package¹. This year the Commission introduced a strengthened approach to its assessments in the annual reports on enlargement countries, which not only covered progress but also reported on the state of play and the countries' level of preparedness to take on the obligations of membership. The reports also provide clearer guidance on what the countries are expected to do.

The EU's enlargement policy remains focused on the 'fundamentals first' principle. Reflecting the core EU values and policy priorities, the enlargement process continues to prioritise reforms in the areas of the rule of law, fundamental rights, the strengthening of democratic institutions, including public administration reform, and economic development and competitiveness.

The 2015 EU Enlargement Strategy highlights the main challenges for candidate countries and potential candidates. Regarding fundamental rights, in the Western Balkans and Turkey the Commission continues to underline that while these are often largely enshrined in law, further efforts are needed to ensure implementation in practice. Freedom of expression presents a particular challenge, with ongoing negative developments in a number of countries. The Commission continues to prioritise work on freedom of expression and the media in the EU accession process. There continues to be a need to better protect minorities, in particular Roma, who continue to suffer from discrimination and difficult living conditions. Discrimination and hostility towards other vulnerable groups, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons, is a serious concern. Additional work is also required to promote equality between women and men, fight domestic violence, ensure respect for the rights of the child and support persons with disabilities.

¹ COM(2015) 611 final, Brussels, November 2015.

The functioning of democratic institutions also requires attention. The role of national parliaments in the reform process to ensure democratic accountability still needs to be strengthened.

Enlargement countries need to ensure the effective functioning of the institutional framework for the protection of fundamental rights and a much more supportive and enabling environment to foster the development of civil society as it will contribute to enhancing political accountability and a better understanding of accession-related reforms. The Commission continues to promote and support candidate countries' participation, and that of countries with which a Stabilisation and Association Agreement has been concluded, as observers in the work of the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency. Positive developments were registered in 2015 regarding The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania and Serbia.

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_strategy_paper_en.pdf

Albania

There are four key ongoing projects under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) that focus on enhancing the effectiveness of the Albanian system of human rights protection and anti-discrimination (IPA 2013, EUR 1.5 million), on economic and social empowerment for Roma and Egyptians (IPA 2014, EUR 4 million), on alternative dispute resolution so as to provide citizens with alternative ways to resolve disputes (IPA 2012, EUR 750 000), and on the penitentiary system (IPA 2013, EUR 1 million). There is one on-going prison infrastructure project (IPA 2011, EUR 14.4 million).

Under the IPA's civil society facility, seven projects (totalling approximately EUR 1.2 million) are related to the protection of human rights and aim to foster social inclusion for people belonging to minorities, particularly Roma and Egyptians, monitor respect for fundamental rights in detention centres, support access to justice for vulnerable groups, and promote restorative justice and victim-offender mediation for juveniles.

There are six ongoing projects funded under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) (EUR 1.2 million in total) targeting issues such as the rights of LGBTI persons, the rights of persons with disabilities, child protection, and violence against women. There are seven ongoing projects related to the protection of human rights in education and employment which focus on the inclusion of persons with disabilities and vulnerable groups.

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_albania.pdf

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In 2015, financial assistance under the IPA focused on harmonising legislation with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (EUR 1 million under the IPA 2011) and on supporting the socio-economic empowerment of approximately 260 mine victims and their families through the mine victims support project (EUR 1 million). A new project with a budget of EUR 2.5 million in support of the socio-economic inclusion of the Roma population started in October 2015, building on a previous project with a similar budget. In total the two projects will allow for the provision of 290 housing units and integrated socio-economic measures. The Action directly addresses the issue of lacking housing, poverty and social-economic exclusion of Roma population through (re)construction of homes and related infrastructure and provision of livelihood measures, with a priority to flood-affected areas. The provision of durable housing and other measures for vulnerable returnees or internally displaced persons are financed under the Annex VII return strategy implementation project (EUR 7 million), which is jointly managed with the UNHCR. The EU has provided support of EUR 1 million to the project for the Social Housing System (SHS) – Development of an Integrated Model in Theory and Practice to assist national policy makers to define and implement housing policies supporting refugees, returnees, homeless, youth and others in need.

A new project amounting to EUR 3 million was started to support the technical strengthening of the capacities of the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees and social service providers. Support was also provided for the revision of Bosnia and Herzegovina's anti-discrimination law.

Eleven projects funded under the EIDHR for an overall amount of EUR 2.5 million were implemented in 2015. These projects focused notably on the protection of minorities, including Roma in general and Roma children in particular, the protection of LGBTI persons and the rights of persons with disabilities, as well as the promotion of students' participation in democratic reforms, the empowerment and participation of young people, and the socio-economic empowerment of marginalised groups. Five additional grants amounting to EUR 0.95 million were awarded at the end of 2015, addressing Roma inclusion, tobacco control, good political governance, access to water, and support to youth.

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_bosnia_and_herzegovina.pdf

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

In 2015, the EU provided substantial support to civil society organisations working on the protection of various fundamental rights. The national envelope of the IPA 2014 Civil Society Facility (EUR 5 million) supported 19 projects that mainly focused on the promotion of freedom of expression and the media, investigative journalism, judicial reforms, participatory democracy, inter-ethnic relations and the rights of Roma. The IPA 2011 Grant Scheme for Civil Society (EUR 1.35 million) supported 12 further projects that focused primarily on strengthening civil society's involvement in public policy making, anti-discrimination, and protecting the rights of disabled persons, youth and other vulnerable groups. Lastly, 10 grant projects financed under the EIDHR 2014-2015 scheme (EUR 1.2 million) were implemented with the objective of promoting effective access to justice, human rights education in schools, the right to a safe working environment, transparent and inclusive policy making, and the social inclusion of the Roma community.

Besides these grant projects for civil society organisations, the EU continued implementing a number of human rights-related IPA projects with various public institutions. Among them were projects that focused on support to the Ombudsman's Office for more effective protection of fundamental rights, on the strengthening of the judiciary's independence, efficiency and professionalism, on the reform of the criminal justice system, on a more effective fight against corruption, and on the protection of the rights of detained and convicted persons.

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia.pdf

Kosovo*²

In 2015 a EUR 2 million action was begun with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) under the IPA 2014. The action aims to create income-generating opportunities for minority communities, enhancing their (re-)integration prospects. Under the 2015 allocation of the IPA Civil Society Facility and Media Programme, two actions were contracted to improve the situation of victims of domestic violence and trafficking, and to establish and maintain an effective coalition of human rights civil society organisations, strengthening their advocacy capacities. The overall value of these two projects is EUR 2 million. Furthermore, 2015 saw the completion of the EUR 1 million IPA project, implemented by the Council of Europe, on capacity building for the ombudsman institution and civil society. Other ongoing IPA projects in 2015 were: the EUR 0.7 million twinning project to fight homophobia and transphobia and establish strategic partnerships with civil society organisations to provide legal and psychological counselling; two projects of EUR 1.5 million and EUR 0.6 million respectively providing social services to persons and notably children with disabilities, and justice for children; and a EUR 3 million project focusing on the protection and promotion of the rights of persons belonging to minority communities.

² *This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 (1999) and the ICJ Opinion on Kosovo's declaration of independence.

In 2015, two EIDHR projects for an overall amount of EUR 0.4 million were contracted addressing human rights in the digital age and housing as a fundamental human right. Eleven other projects financed under the EIDHR 2011 and 2012 programmes continued to be implemented by civil society. These projects focused on strengthening the advocacy capacities of vulnerable groups, enhancing inter-community and inter-ethnic relations through cultural activities, and issues related to women's empowerment, the rights of LGBTI persons and persons with disabilities. In addition, implementation of five EIDHR projects with a total approximate value of EUR 1 million started in 2015, the aims of which included strengthening women's organisations and enhancing the political representation and participation of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities.

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_kosovo.pdf

Montenegro

During 2015 three IPA projects worth approximately EUR 1.6 million were implemented in the area of human rights, focusing on the social inclusion of persons with disabilities, sustainable solutions for the internally displaced Roma population, and support to the Ombudsman's Office and the Constitutional Court for the application of human rights standards. As regards new commitments, in 2015 approximately EUR 2.35 million was allocated from IPA funds for six projects related to anti-discrimination policies and human rights (social inclusion of children and youth with disabilities; social inclusion of women who are victims of violence; rights of mental health patients; social entrepreneurship, economic empowerment and political participation of women; and gender-based violence).

In addition, in 2015 the EU provided financial support totalling EUR 700 000 to six projects under the EIDHR (Country-Based Support Scheme). The projects focused on a range of areas, such as the rights of LGBTI persons, the political participation of Roma (establishment of the first trade union composed of Roma workers), consumer protection and patients' rights, increasing trust in elections, and combating gender-based violence. Another four EIDHR projects worth approximately EUR 400 000 were ongoing in 2015, focusing on the social inclusion of Roma, the prevention of ill-treatment in prisons through the reform of rehabilitation and re-socialisation services, and the rights of persons with disabilities.

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_montenegro.pdf

Serbia

In 2015, the EU continued to implement four projects under the IPA programme to support anti-discrimination policies and to improve the situation of vulnerable people, including Roma, refugees and internally displaced persons. In 2015 there were four projects relating to Roma inclusion, with a total value of EUR 11.4 million. In October 2015, the twinning project 'Support to the advancement of human rights and zero tolerance to discrimination' was launched. It will last 18 months and have a total value of EUR 1.2 million. In the context of the Civil Society Facility 2013, 22 grants were awarded to civil society organisations with an overall value of EUR 2.4 million. The newly funded projects will contribute to the fight against corruption by increasing transparency in the public sector, providing support to the people and groups most exposed to discrimination, and supporting cooperation between Serbia and Kosovo through cultural, media and youth initiatives.

In 2015, a new call for proposals was published under the EIDHR budget for 2014 and 2015, with a total value of EUR 2 million. Twenty grants were awarded to civil society organisations focusing on the protection of minorities, the rights of LGBTI persons, gender equality, children's rights, rights for asylum seekers and the rights of persons with disabilities.

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_serbia.pdf

Turkey

The Country Strategy Paper 2014-2020 (IPA II assistance) for Turkey identifies reform and capacity building in the areas of rule of law and fundamental rights as major priorities. Under the IPA, there are several notable projects focusing on human rights, for example capacity-building projects with relevant human rights mechanisms (such as the national human rights institution, the ombudsman, the parliament, and the Bar Associations), projects on freedom of expression, and projects focusing on women's rights and anti-discrimination. The recently adopted IPA 2015 national programme includes a EUR 17.9 million action in support of the judiciary that aims to strengthen the independence, impartiality, efficiency and administration of the judiciary. As regards fundamental rights, the programme includes a EUR 18.9 million action designed to enhance key institutions as well as to support efforts to prevent and combat violence against women and children. The home affairs action will provide support to Turkey for implementing related requirements as well as contribute to the efforts to host refugees from the conflict in Syria (EUR 112 million). A standalone action with a value of EUR 4.7 million will support the social inclusion of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Van province.

EIDHR projects in Turkey focus on the most critical human rights issues for the country, including freedom of expression and an independent media, improved access to justice, the fight against torture and impunity, the protection of and respect for cultural diversity, vulnerable groups and the rights of persons belonging to minorities, human rights education and training programmes, and enhancing political representation and participation in society, particularly for underrepresented groups (including women, LGBTI persons, Roma and youth). In December 2015, 33 projects were under way under the EIDHR Turkey Programme. Twenty-two new project contracts were signed in December 2015, for a value of EUR 3 million. The new projects cover several critical human rights areas: human rights defenders; the rights of LGBTI persons; women's rights and countering violence against women; minorities and refugees. The EIDHR is also expected to have a role to play in the response to the Syrian crisis, working with civil society organisations on the rights of refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons and migrants in general. Priorities in this area are consistent with, and complementary to, the work conducted under the IPA, the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), and other important instruments such as the EU Trust Fund.

http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_turkey.pdf

Multi-beneficiary assistance

Under the multi-beneficiary assistance, projects under the IPA 2012 and 2013 continue to be implemented in relation to the protection and promotion of minorities (EUR 3.6 million) and the provision of regional support for inclusive education (EUR 4.6 million).

II. EEA/EFTA Countries

Switzerland

The EU's human rights strategy in Switzerland is focused primarily on cooperating and maintaining a close dialogue with Switzerland on human rights matters in international organisations (UN, CoE, OSCE, etc.) and in specific countries across the world. Switzerland plays an active role in the UN Human Rights Council, and has been elected as a member for the period 2016-2018.

Human rights are included in the EU's public diplomacy and information activities in Switzerland, to stress the leading role which the EU plays worldwide in championing the global human rights agenda.

Regarding the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), despite some disagreement in Switzerland with individual rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, there is general recognition that its rulings have positively influenced the case law of the Swiss Federal Court concerning human rights and the charter of fundamental rights of the constitution. Nevertheless, a proposed popular initiative from the political right aims to establish the superiority of the Swiss constitution over international law, including the ECHR, in order to safeguard fundamental and human rights autonomously and, according to the initiators, respect the will of the Swiss people. Taking a somewhat softer approach, in December the upper chamber of the Swiss federal assembly discussed a motion already supported by the lower chamber to task the Swiss Federal Council to work at all relevant levels, and in particular in the Council of Europe, towards increasing compliance with and enforcement of the principle of subsidiarity, and ensuring that the European Court of Human Rights takes national legal systems into account more systematically in its case law.

Norway

As the EU and Norway share similar human rights standards, the EU's human rights strategy is focused primarily on cooperating and maintaining a close dialogue with Norway on human rights matters in international organisations (UN, Council of Europe, OSCE, etc.) and in specific countries across the world. In Norway, human rights are included in the EU's public diplomacy and information activities, to stress the EU's leading role worldwide.

More generally, the International Bill of Human Rights, as well as the many conventions and other instruments to promote and protect specific human rights, for example with regard to racial discrimination, torture, and the rights of women, children and persons with disabilities – together with the notion of human rights promotion as specified in the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – form the basis for Norwegian human rights support, which is maintained by various means, including development cooperation. While there is no current plan of action on human rights as a whole, there are plans for specific areas, e.g. human trafficking, children's rights and women's rights. Human rights remain key as the Norwegian government increases its focus on thematic areas where Norway is considered to have particular strengths. Priority areas for Norwegian development cooperation in support of human rights include supporting human rights defenders, the rule of law and work against torture and the death penalty, freedom of speech and a free media, corporate social responsibility, human rights dialogues with selected countries and promotion of the rights of women, children, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

Iceland

Iceland has a comprehensive system for safeguarding fundamental rights and freedoms. It has a high level of cooperation with international organisations on human rights issues. In terms of specific initiatives, Iceland has actively promoted and endorsed UN and other international initiatives to promote the role of men in gender equality. On 14-15 January 2015 Iceland and Suriname hosted the so-called 'Barbershop' conference at the UN Headquarters in New York, which aimed to get men to take a more active role in discussing the issue of equal rights between men and women. At regional level, Iceland has contributed to the work of the Arctic Council on these subjects.

Human rights issues are included in the EU's public diplomacy and outreach activities in Iceland, to emphasise the EU's leading role worldwide.

Holy See

There are quite frequent and useful contacts with the Holy See in the context of multilateral fora on a range of human rights issues, including in the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe. The EU guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief are increasingly relevant as a basis for collaboration, given that the Holy See is extremely worried about the growing persecution of Christians in various parts of the world.

Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco, San Marino

As the EU and Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco and San Marino share similar human rights standards, the EU's human rights strategy is focused primarily on coordinating with them on human rights matters in international organisations (UN, Council of Europe, OSCE, etc.). The EU also takes part in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the human rights situation in these countries within the framework of the UN Human Rights Council.

III. European Neighbourhood Policy

In 2015, the joint communication on the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) reaffirmed the EU commitment to promote and defend the universality and indivisibility of all human rights both at home and in partnership with countries of all regions. It stressed the continuing importance of good governance, democracy, rule of law and human rights and pointed out the need to ensure independent and effective justice systems as a priority for the EU in the neighbourhood region. Freedom of expression, pluralism and independence of the media – including an open and free internet – are also identified as key areas of the ENP review.

The ENP review acknowledged that the incentive-based approach ("More for More") was successful in supporting reforms in the fields of good governance, democracy, the rule of law and human rights, where there was a commitment by partners to such reforms. However, where the political will is not there, it has not proven a sufficiently strong incentive to create a commitment to reform. In these cases, the EU will explore more effective ways to make its case for fundamental reforms with partners, including through engagement with civil, economic and social actors.

The EU has therefore reaffirmed in 2015 its engagement with all partners in an inclusive dialogue on human rights and democracy issues, including on areas where experiences may differ. Human rights and democracy will continue to be an agenda item in EU political dialogue with all partners in mutually agreed formats. With those commitments laid out, the ENP review also underlined the need to find new ways of more effectively promoting universal values and the EU's intention to do more to support to civil society and to expand its outreach to relevant members of civil society in its broadest sense as well as social partners.

Armenia

EU-Armenia bilateral cooperation and political dialogue in this area focuses on the promotion of human rights but also on continuously improving democratic institutions, the judiciary and the rule of law, good governance, the fight against corruption and the strengthening of civil society. While Armenia has been making some efforts to address human rights issues, the main weakness remains the adoption and proper enforcement of reforms and legislation.

The EU maintains regular and active dialogue with Armenia on human rights in different fora, including an annual human rights dialogue. The 2015 dialogue was postponed for technical reasons and is foreseen to take place in March 2016 in Yerevan.

In a local statement together with the EU Heads of Missions, the EU expressed its concern regarding the alleged irregularities of the 6 December constitutional reform referendum and urged the authorities to ensure proper investigation.

To ensure that reforms are in place in good time before the next elections, the EU continued to encourage Armenia to implement the 2012 and 2013 OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, in particular regarding the legislative framework. The EU also urged Armenia to take the ODIHR Referendum Expert Team report into account (publication in January 2016). For this purpose the EU provides some financial electoral assistance to Armenia.

The EU emphasises the need to ensure equal opportunities and the participation of women, including in political life and at higher levels of the administration. The EU provides support for women's increased participation in decision making and has continued to support the adoption of gender based/domestic violence legislation. Prison conditions remain a concern, as does ill-treatment during pre-trial detention. The EU continued to support the alignment of prison conditions with the standards of the Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT). Some limited progress was noted with the development of a Penitentiary Reform Action Plan in line with the CPT's recommendations and the construction of a new prison according to CPT standards, co-funded by the EU.

The draft law to introduce a probation service in Armenia has not been adopted. Ongoing concerns include the need to ensure respect for the principle of non-discrimination and adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation protecting the rights of vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities, and of LGBTI persons, and implement the law on the provision of equal rights efficiently, to finalise the draft law on freedom of conscience and religion. The EU has continued to support public administration reforms and in particular emphasized the need to intensify the prevention of and the fight against corruption, and to intensify the reform of the judiciary and law enforcement and improve public trust in the judicial system.

During 2015, the EU continued to facilitate the structural dialogue between civil society and the authorities. The EU continued regular consultations with civil society and financial support to projects implemented by civil society organisations (CSOs). The European Endowment for Democracy, meanwhile, provides support to grassroots organisations. Together with UNICEF, the EU provided support for the deinstitutionalisation of children. Children remained among the poorest groups in society (36.2%), with children with disabilities at higher risk of living in poverty.

The EU continued to provide substantial assistance to strengthen the independence and professionalism of the justice system in Armenia. This included budget support and a joint project with the Council of Europe.

The European Neighbourhood Instrument has also made available a EUR 12 million budget support programme in the field of human rights, supporting the implementation of relevant legislation. Armenia benefits from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). The EIDHR continues to contribute to the development of democracy and respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms through assistance in support of women's rights, youth rights, the rights of refugees (notably Syrian-Armenians), the rule of law, and citizen journalism.

Azerbaijan

The main priorities for the EU in Azerbaijan remain freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, the development of a functioning civil society and the rule of law. In 2015, many human rights activists were sentenced and the space for civil society shrank due to very restrictive and cumbersome legislation on NGOs. In reference to the sentencing of a number of human rights activists, the EU issued statements expressing its concerns regarding the lengthy sentences and the legal process as a whole – including for lack of equality of arms – and calling on Azerbaijan to fully abide by its international commitments and to work towards establishing trust in the independence of its judicial system. The EU also issued statements on the conditional release of human rights activists Leyla and Arif Yunus on medical grounds.

The EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Human Rights, Lambrinidis visited Azerbaijan in February 2015 for meetings with President Ilham Aliyev and a number of ministers (including Foreign Minister Mammadyarov), the Ombudswoman and civil society representatives. The EUSR expressed the EU's grave concern over the worsening human rights situation and tried to re-establish the trust and dialogue necessary to address these issues, calling in particular for the fair treatment and release of detained individuals and for the swift adoption of regulations that would allow for the transparent and unhindered funding and functioning of NGOs. During the visit, the EUSR requested and was able to visit three prisoners of conscience.

Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Hahn and President of the European Council Tusk visited Baku in April and July, discussing, among other things, human rights issues in Azerbaijan.

The secondary NGO legislation on the registration of grants and on the right of foreign donors to give grants in Azerbaijan was adopted on 4 December. After significant delays which had a strong negative impact on the financing of civil society, the new rules make it more complicated for foreign donors – including the EU – to provide grants, and place additional administrative burdens on CSOs.

The EU Delegation continued its regular thematic dialogue with civil organisations. Civil society representatives were regularly invited to meet officials visiting from Brussels or other capitals, including for high-level visits, to brief them about the situation in the country. A number of meetings with independent NGOs were also held on a bilateral basis regarding specific issues. The EU also addressed human rights and democracy with Azerbaijan in various formats. However, the annual EU-Azerbaijan human rights dialogue, one of the main platforms for the EU and Azerbaijan to engage in discussions, did not take place in 2015. After the initial date of November 2014 was rescheduled, the meeting was indefinitely postponed by Azerbaijan (now scheduled to take place in October 2016). In a joint effort, the EU Delegation and EU Member States continued the monitoring of several trials and observing new cases whilst assessing compliance with fair and transparent procedures. The EU Delegation was responsible for coordination on these issues and for some joint follow-up on assessments after verdicts. The EU Delegation was also very involved and in close contact with the authorities on individual cases, including those of human rights activists Leyla and Arif Yunus. The Delegation also visited several prisoners in detention, including leaders of the REAL party Ilgar Mammedov and Hilal Mammedov. It kept close contact with family members and lawyers in individual cases, and followed up on some information about conditions in prisons, including alleged beatings and mistreatment of sentenced activists. The EU continued to call on Azerbaijan to comply with the judgements of the European Court of Human rights, notably in relation to the arrest of Ilgar Mammedov.

Azerbaijan held parliamentary elections on 1 November in which the main opposition parties did not participate, considering that the conditions were not in place to ensure a level playing field. A delegation from PACE observed the elections. As no agreement was reached on the number of observers, OSCE/ODIHR decided not to send a monitoring mission. The European Parliament did not observe the elections either. The EU issued a statement taking note of the elections and of the need for Azerbaijan to implement previous recommendations by the OSCE/ODIHR, and saying that it looked forward to continuing cooperation with Azerbaijani institutions to the benefit of all citizens.

On 28 December, President Aliyev signed the traditional Azerbaijan Solidarity Day act granting pardons to prisoners, but it did not include any human rights activists or journalists.

In the absence of rules on the registration of donors and grants for most of the year, financial cooperation with civil society in 2015 was limited, depriving the EU of one of its key partners for the promotion of EU values and standards.

An EU-funded, CSO-implemented project continued capacity-building work on gender equality and women's empowerment and participation in community life, and on legal rights, communication skills, participation mechanisms and business and entrepreneurial skills for local community women.

Cooperation with the Council of Europe within the framework of the regional Programmatic Cooperation Framework saw the implementation of several capacity development actions on freedom of expression, the efficiency of the judiciary and the training of legal professionals on the European Convention of Human Rights standards and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights.

A number of twinning programmes were initiated or continued to be implemented, harnessing EU Member States' expertise on strengthening the ombudsman institution and its regional centres to ensure the implementation of its mandate in relation to the national preventive mechanism, the rights of the child, the rights of persons with disabilities, the human rights of older people and the right to access to information; working with the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection on social inclusion for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups; and working with the State Social Protection Fund on drawing up the laws on the funded part of labour pensions and private pension funds.

Drawing on the expertise of UNICEF, the EU continued to work on promoting access to justice and the rule of law for children through legislative analysis; improved data collection and analysis with regard to justice for children and juvenile justice matters; the provision of legal aid, legal representation and psychosocial support services for vulnerable children and their families; a capacity needs assessment of the National Preventive Group of the Ombudsman's Office with regard to its mandate on independent child rights monitoring in facilities where children are being kept; and capacity building for NPG members.

Belarus

In 2015 the overall human rights situation in Belarus remained marked by systematic human rights violations. No legislative changes were introduced in view of easing the restrictions on freedom of assembly, association and the media. Positive steps were taken by Belarus in the second half of the year. This included Belarus's proposal to resume the EU-Belarus human rights dialogue which had been interrupted in 2009. The dialogue took place in July in Brussels. Topics discussed included freedom of expression, assembly and association, the death penalty and the fight against torture and ill-treatment, the establishment of a national human rights institution, the rights of the child and multilateral issues.

Amendments to the law on mass media which came into force in January 2015 tightened state control over the dissemination of information on the internet and via traditional media. The Ministry of Information retains the right to close a news outlet after two warnings.

On 22 August all remaining political prisoners, some of whom had been incarcerated since the 2010 post-presidential election crackdown, were released. The EU welcomed this long-sought step and decided to suspend EU restrictive measures partially and temporarily at the end of October, for a period of four months. The EU continues to call for the reinstatement of the civil and political rights of former political prisoners.

Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka was re-elected on 11 October with 83.5 % of the vote. Belarus cooperated fully with the OSCE/ODIHR in the organisation of the election observation mission. The OSCE/ODIHR concluded in its preliminary findings that Belarus still has a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments for democratic elections. Most violations recorded related to arbitrary decisions on candidate registration, the exclusion of opposition representatives from electoral commissions, and the inadequate process of counting and tabulating votes. It was important that election day proceeded in a peaceful atmosphere and that the authorities refrained from the use of force when faced with a number of unsanctioned public protests. Nevertheless, organisers of opposition rallies were charged under the Administrative Offences Code.

No new political party has been registered in Belarus since 2000. Members of unregistered organisations are under constant threat of prosecution. Several cases of harassment of human rights defenders were reported throughout the year. Pressure on journalists was significant in the first half of the year, with freelance journalists heavily fined for cooperating with foreign media without accreditation, which is itself difficult to obtain. In the run-up to the presidential elections the pressure eased. After some problems at the beginning of the year, independent news websites could be accessed without restrictions by the end of the year.

Belarus remains the only country in Europe where the death penalty is applied. In 2015 one execution took place even as the executed man's complaint was still pending in the UN Human Rights Committee. The fate of another person on death row is unknown. Two new death sentences were pronounced in 2015 and the EU issued statements in each case, calling on Belarus to introduce a moratorium on the death penalty.

The conditions of detention and police and prison guard brutality continue to be an issue in Belarus. In 2015, for the first time, EU diplomats were able to visit a correctional facility. Among NGOs and international organisations, only one organisation enjoys unlimited access. Cases against the prison administration from previous years have not been investigated. Some activists have recounted their own experiences of police brutality during arrests (e.g. the 'graffiti case' and the blogger Nikitsenka).

Since 2015 a definition of torture, based on the UN Convention against Torture, has been included in the Criminal Code of Belarus under Article 128. However, Belarusian legislation does not provide for legal penalties against perpetrators of torture or cruel treatment. The rare cases of officials who have been punished were based on the article on 'exceeding official powers'.

The EU presented the resolution adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in June to extend the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus for a period of one year. Belarus also participated in the UN's Universal Periodic Review and accepted 168 out of the 259 recommendations.

The EU also contributed to the examination of compliance of Belarus with the ILO Freedom of Association Convention 87 at the 104th International Labour Conference.

Georgia

In 2015 Georgia achieved considerable progress in bringing national law into line with EU standards, including in the field of human rights, as noted during the first human rights dialogue following the signature and provisional entry into force of the Association Agreement.

The EU closely monitors the implementation of Georgia's Human Rights Strategy, in particular with regard to reforms designed to increase the independence of the judiciary and guarantee the rule of law, address child poverty and domestic violence, and fight discrimination.

Within the framework of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) report, the EU Delegation initiated and organised a series of meetings with UN agencies and EU Member States, as well as major partners such as the US, Switzerland, Turkey, and civil society representatives. In July, the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs submitted the second report for Georgia as part of the second cycle of the UN Human Rights Council's UPR.

Human rights were on the EU-Georgia agenda in 2015 with several high-level EU visits: President Tusk in July, the High Representative/Vice-President of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Mogherini, in November, and Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Hahn in January and November. The human rights dialogue held in June in Tbilisi highlighted the country's commitment to achieving sustainable progress on human rights in Georgia and the breakaway regions, which should be to the benefit of internally displaced persons.

The implementation of the Human Rights Strategy and its action plan were also reviewed during the EU-Georgia Association Council held in Brussels in November. Georgia's commitment to fulfilling the benchmarks related to the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan (VLAP) has been a driver for reforms. In December, the Commission published the fourth progress report on the implementation of the VLAP by the Georgian authorities and concluded in a positive assessment that all benchmarks had been fulfilled and therefore several key reforms had been undertaken.

Georgia has undertaken ambitious justice reform, primarily in order to guarantee the independence of the judiciary and develop effective systems for conducting investigations and proceedings. It is worth noting the increasingly prominent role of the Constitutional Court, including in high-level cases (e.g. the confirmation of the nine-month pre-trial detention limit in the case of Gigi Ugulava, former mayor of Tbilisi).

In September the Parliament passed a bill on the reform of the Prosecutor's Office, providing for more transparency in electing the Chief Prosecutor. Another crucial step was an attempt to create an accountable and balanced law enforcement system by guaranteeing the separation of the security services from the Interior Ministry. An independent mechanism to deal with alleged crimes of law enforcement officials is yet to be created. There has also been a significant improvement in detention conditions, as demonstrated by the notable reduction in prison deaths and the eradication of torture. The implementation of the VLAP recommendations has led to the introduction of substantial changes in drug policy (the Criminal Code has been amended to distinguish between purchase/possession of drugs for personal use and for sale to others). However, forced drug testing has not been abandoned.

In June 2015, Georgia adopted a Juvenile Justice Code covering all children in the criminal justice and administrative violation systems, which has led to fewer children being deprived of their liberty. However, the children's rights situation remains alarming, with a worryingly tolerant attitude towards violence against children and a new upsurge in early marriages. In November, the parliament banned underage marriage, with the exception of children between 16-18 years old, with the court's consent and only in the case of pregnancy or birth of a child.

Although the Public Defender's Office has been gaining traction, efforts should be intensified to ensure the rights of persons belonging to minorities and apply the anti-discrimination policy effectively in practice. Numerous cases have proved that law enforcement does not carry out serious, proactive investigation into incidents of hate speech.

Legislation on gender equality has been strengthened, and has been coupled with awareness-raising campaigns, but Georgian society remains overwhelmingly conservative with deeply embedded gender stereotypes. Women are still highly underrepresented in political life, especially in key decision-making positions, and the scale of domestic violence and violence against women is alarming.

Media freedom remained under close international scrutiny this year, especially in relation to the major case over ownership of the opposition TV channel Rustavi 2. The EU Delegation made a joint statement together with the Embassy of the United States of America and in agreement with the Heads of Mission of the EU Member States in Georgia calling on all political actors to refrain from any step or statement that could prevent the Georgian judiciary from ruling dispassionately on the Rustavi 2 case. Apart from this highly politicised case, media professionals continued to carry out their work independently.

Ahead of the 2016 parliamentary elections, the electoral environment has been politically charged. The reform of the electoral system has been delayed as there has been no agreement between the ruling coalition and the opposition parties on fundamental principles. Law enforcement officers have proved to be unable to prevent and properly investigate violence along party lines, for example in the notable case of attacks on dozens of United National Movement regional offices in November 2015.

The human rights situation in the breakaway regions, which offer limited access to international scrutiny, and in villages close to the Administrative Boundary Lines (ABLs), has been a source of continuous concern. The so-called 'borderisation' along the ABLs continues to separate communities and exacerbates the already dire economic situation of the villagers.

Overall, civil society organisations in Georgia have been very active and it will be important to ensure an open space for them ahead of the elections. These organisations also play a role in monitoring the implementation of the Association Agreement.

Republic of Moldova

During 2015 the Association Agreement between the EU and the Republic of Moldova continued to be provisionally implemented, with overall progress made on legislative approximation in sectors covered by the agreement, but more limited achievements in key reform areas, including the rule of law. Several governments succeeded each other, and the year ended with ongoing consultations to form a new coalition.

The local elections held in June 2015 were given a positive overall assessment by the limited OSCE/ODIHR mission deployed to the Republic of Moldova, although they took place in a context of political instability, only two days after the prime minister's resignation. In its final report, the OSCE/ODIHR mission recognised that the local elections were efficiently administered and offered the electorate a diverse choice. However, it also noted that confidence in the electoral process decreased following cases of abuse of temporary voter registration provisions.

The Electoral Code was amended in April 2015, improving legislation on campaigns and campaign financing in line with previous OSCE/ODIHR and Council of Europe recommendations. Despite this positive development, some shortcomings remain, such as the prohibition on the use of state and foreign symbols or images and on the involvement of foreign citizens in campaigns, which has been assessed as a disproportionate restriction by OSCE.

Positive developments in 2015 included the appointment of the People's Advocate (ombudsman), although the institution should still be strengthened, including through the establishment of an effective national preventive mechanism against torture. Another development was the establishment of a joint working group between the Moldovan parliament and the People's Assembly of Gagauzia on the implementation of the law on the special autonomous status of Gagauzia. It should also be noted that 27 January was recognised as Holocaust Remembrance Day and there has been some progress in drafting the new Human Rights Action Plan and a Strategy on Integration of National Minorities. During the reporting period, limited progress was made in the area of justice sector reform and evidence remained of ongoing corruption in the justice system. Concerns remained on the use of prolonged pre-trial detention and poor detention conditions. The case of Grigore Petrenco and six other activists, who were arrested under charges of mass disorder in September 2015 and kept under long pre-trial detention, raises questions also in relation to freedom of assembly.

Overall, the situation as regards freedom of expression and freedom of the media remained good throughout 2015, with free access to a large number of media outlets. However, a number of issues remain. In spite of new legislation on media ownership adopted in 2015, which improved transparency, ownership remains concentrated, thus limiting media plurality.

Consultations with civil society continued throughout the year, particularly in view of human rights-related events. The annual human rights dialogue was held in Chisinau in June, allowing for discussion on issues such as freedom of expression and the media, anti-discrimination, including the rights of persons with disabilities, gender equality, the rights of persons belonging to minorities, and combating hate crimes. The meeting also touched on the fight against impunity and ill-treatment, including reparations to victims.

The EU also funded and organised a TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange) seminar on the reform of the guardianship system, which currently limits the participation of persons with disabilities in public life. The reform of guardianship was discussed again during the annual EU-Moldova Human Rights Expert Talks held in Chisinau in November 2015, with the participation of the UN, the OSCE and the Council of Europe. The Human Rights Expert Talks also provided an opportunity to continue discussions on different human rights topics, including human rights in justice, rights of persons belonging to minorities, and anti-discrimination.

During 2015 several projects funded by the EU and its Member States continued to be implemented, including projects supporting anti-discrimination, the rights of vulnerable groups (elderly people, children, Roma, persons with disabilities), gender equality and the strengthening of civil society, which were of benefit to several regions of the country, including Transnistria.

Ukraine

EU policy priorities in relation to Ukraine include judicial and election reform, respect for freedom of expression, assembly and association, non-discrimination, the fight against torture and inhuman and degrading treatment, the equality of men and women, respect for children's rights, decentralisation and anti-corruption. The conflict in eastern Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by the Russian Federation has led to a significant deterioration in the human rights situation in the territories not under the effective control of the government, and have also had an impact on human rights and democracy as a whole in the country in 2015. In addition to a direct negative impact on the socio-economic rights, in particular the most vulnerable such as women and children, the conflict has also led to restrictions on fundamental rights to freedoms of expression, association, peaceful assembly and religion in various parts of Ukraine.

International human rights stakeholders, including the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission, have recorded a substantial number of violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law in the conflict affected areas of eastern Ukraine, particularly in territories not under the effective control of the government. The impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators on all sides remains a cause of serious concern and must be addressed.

Due to the conflict, addressing the fundamental rights of at least 1.4 million internally displaced persons was a key challenge confronting the government in 2015. Furthermore, the Ukrainian government formally notified the Council of Europe and the United Nations that, given the emergency situation in the country, it would be derogating from some of the obligations stipulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). As such derogations reduce human rights protection, they are only legitimate under Article 4 of the ICCPR and Article 15 of the ECHR if certain conditions are met. All measures taken under the derogation regime must be proportional and non-discriminatory and their duration, geographic and material scope must be limited to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation. Whether or not these conditions are met needs to be reviewed on a regular basis.

In the Crimean peninsula, the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms has deteriorated significantly since the illegal annexation by the Russian Federation, particularly for pro-Ukrainian activists, journalists and the Crimean Tatar community. Members of these groups are subjected inter alia to arbitrary criminal prosecutions, house searches and in several cases enforced disappearances. During her visit to Ukraine in November 2015, HR/VP Mogherini met with civil society representatives and Crimean Tatar leaders. The worrying deterioration of the human rights situation in Crimea figured prominently in the EU's public communications, including Council conclusions and statements.

Local elections were held in the areas under the control of the Ukrainian government in autumn 2015. According to election observers of international organisations, the elections were competitive and well-organised overall, and the campaign generally showed respect for the democratic process. However, the integrity of and public confidence in the electoral process in the future needs to be enhanced by addressing the lack of a sound electoral code, the over-politicised electoral administration, the disproportionate media coverage of candidates with oligarchic backing, and the lack of gender balance in the outcome.

In the area of freedom of expression and the media, good progress was made in bringing legislation close to European standards. The parliament adopted one of the most progressive and far-reaching legal frameworks in Europe in relation to transparency of ownership. The law on the denationalisation of state-owned regional print media is a step forward in advancing media freedom and pluralism in the country by creating a competitive environment for media outlets and ensuring the independence of their editorial and management policies, as is the gradual establishment of an independent public broadcaster.

Furthermore, the parliament adopted amendments to the Labour Code which explicitly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, making it compliant with Ukraine's international human rights obligations. In August 2015 President Poroshenko issued a decree approving the National Human Rights Strategy and in November the Cabinet of Ministers adopted the action plan for the implementation of the Strategy. These were also important elements in the context of the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan (VLAP) and their effective implementation needs to be ensured.

Ukraine has lodged a second declaration with the International Criminal Court (ICC) accepting its jurisdiction over crimes against humanity and war crimes committed on Ukrainian territory since 20 February 2014. A preliminary probe by the ICC stated that crimes committed at Maidan between November 2013 and February 2014 (under the first Ukrainian declaration recognising the ICC's jurisdiction in 2014) 'do not amount to crimes against humanity', noting at the same time that 'serious human rights abuses did occur'.

Impunity and the lack of protection and justice for victims remain a cause of concern. According to the reports of the International Advisory Panel (IAP) of the Council of Europe on the investigations into the violent incidents during the Maidan demonstrations and the tragic events in Odessa in May 2014, the Ukrainian government failed to satisfy the requirements of the European Convention on Human Rights. The IAP acknowledged that the investigation faced significant challenges but concluded that these challenges 'cannot excuse any failings which did not inevitably flow from them'.

The EU, together with the EU Member States, has remained highly engaged in the field of human rights with the Ukrainian government, as well as with local and international human rights stakeholders. The EU-Ukraine human rights dialogue was held in July 2015. The dialogue had a comprehensive agenda in line with the established policy priorities. Discussions covered a range of issues, including elections, freedom of the media and freedom of peaceful assembly, ensuring accountability and non-discrimination policy, including the rights of LGBTI persons and persons belonging to ethnic, linguistic, religious and national minorities, and the ratification of the Rome Statute of the ICC,

The EU scaled up its support to the Council of Europe's Action Plan for Ukraine 2015-2017, which is a joint initiative of the Council of Europe and the Ukrainian authorities concentrating on Ukraine's treaty-based commitments. Furthermore, the EU supported the implementation of its policy priorities through EU external instruments such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI) and the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP).

Egypt

In 2015 Egypt faced allegations of prolonged pre-trial detention, irregular and arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, police brutality and torture and deaths in detention, the harassment and detention of media professionals, and mass sentences against Muslim Brotherhood leaders (including former President Morsi and Parliament Speaker Katatny). There were also reports of lethal use of force during police raids,. Pressure on NGOs, by means such as inspections and travel bans, increased. Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2015 report dropped Egypt from 'partly free' to 'not free' due to censorship, prosecution, and attacks on journalists, as well as state surveillance of electronic communications. Further, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Egypt ranked second for the worst record of imprisoning journalists in the world. There were also instances of harassment and violence against irregular migrants, especially Sudanese people. On the upside, there were improvements in the area of women's rights, the president pardoned a number of protesters, and the cabinet endorsed an anti-smuggling law in line with international standards.

While steps were taken by the government and in particular through the initiative of President Sisi, to protect Christian minorities, including through a pledge to rebuild churches damaged in 2013, freedom of religion or belief were not safeguarded; both atheists and Christians were charged with contempt of Islam based on laws against blasphemy or contempt for religion.

The EU continued to closely monitor the human rights situation in Egypt and prominently raised the situation at bilateral level and in multilateral fora. Salient human rights issues were raised throughout the year at senior level, including during high-level visits by the President of the European Council and the HR/VP in September and November. The HR/VP stressed in particular the importance of upholding the rule of law, human rights and media freedom, and of open and democratic societies as the best antidote against radicalisation. In November, the first sub-committee in five years on political matters (human rights, democracy, and international and regional issues) was held in Cairo in the framework of the EU-Egypt Association Agreement, at which the EU raised human rights issues and aimed to assuage Egyptian concerns on the compatibility of security with a rights-based approach.

The situation in Egypt was cited by the EU as one of concern at the HRC in June and September, where the implementation of the 2014 constitution was highlighted as an important means of improving the human rights situation and of opening the space for civil society.

In August President Sisi enacted an Anti-terrorism Law which expanded the definition of terrorism and established sentences ranging from prison time to death.

The death penalty still applies in Egypt. In 2015 approximately 405 death sentences were passed, and at least 12 executions were carried out. These included six alleged jihadists.

Independent human rights organisations, as well as Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated bodies, continued to face government prosecution. Around 500 NGOs are thought to have been closed down in 2015.

Arrests, assaults and deportations of members of the LGBTI community were reported. Arrested individuals were on several occasions referred to trial, where they were given harsh sentences after very short proceedings, and convicted of debauchery.

Some improvement was observed in the field of women's rights. In November the Minister for Justice announced the creation of special courts for cases involving violence against women, in order to ensure such cases are processed quickly. Two people were convicted of carrying out female genital mutilation (FGM), the first convictions since Egypt criminalised the practice in 2008. The practice of FGM seems to be slowly declining.

Twenty Sudanese refugees were gunned down on Egypt's border with Israel in November. The incident revealed the increasingly fraught conditions for irregular migrants on Egypt's borders. On a more positive note, the cabinet approved an anti-smuggling law that stipulates imprisonment and substantial fines for smugglers and their accomplices. Punishment can amount to life imprisonment and fines exceeding USD 25 000. Significantly, the law does not criminalise irregular migrants but rather obliges the state to provide them with protection in line with Egypt's international obligations. The EU also provides support (via grants) in areas such as women empowerment, access to justice for women, providing legal services to women and children. Support to youth employment, promotion of intercultural dialogue, support to organisations working with vulnerable groups (migrants, refugees, persons with disabilities etc.) are as well areas supported by the EU. Through its thematic instruments, the EU also brought crucial financial support to Egyptian human rights defenders and their organisations.

The EU raised specific cases with the Egyptian authorities in which journalists and human rights defenders had been arrested, detained or sentenced, and members of civil society organisations had been put under severe pressure. The EU also maintained regular contact with human rights organisations and human rights defenders (HRDs): the HR/VP met with prominent organisations and defenders in November in Cairo. The EU actively engaged with Egypt on its UPR commitments, as well as on invitations to UN special rapporteurs. An EU informal group on human rights held monthly meetings, where human rights developments and concerns were discussed and to which HRDs and members of the National Council for Human Rights and other relevant human rights stakeholders were invited.

The EU monitored trials of activists and human rights defenders throughout the year. Furthermore, in view of the importance of implementing the 2014 constitution in order to improve fundamental rights and freedoms, the EU continued to call for parliamentary elections and deployed an election expert mission (EEM) in September to assess the electoral process and provide recommendations on ways to improve the electoral environment and process.

The EU implemented projects on human rights advocacy, social and economic rights, intercultural dialogue, local governance and access to culture in 2015. This included support for the promotion and protection of civil, social, economic and cultural rights, especially for groups particularly vulnerable to discrimination, and the promotion of inclusive/active citizenship and a culture of tolerance and pluralism.

The EU provided support for the modernisation of the administration of justice. European experts were deployed as part of a project implemented by a consortium of European public administrations, providing support to Ministry of Justice departments to improve and enhance the delivery of justice services to the population, and to the national centre of judicial studies to help develop and implement a training policy for judges and justice professionals. The project also supported the Court of Cassation in implementing its modernisation strategy and reducing the backlog of cases, assisted the Judicial Information Centre in implementing a computerised case management system, and provided support to the Ministry of Justice's department for women and children. A key aim of this engagement is the promotion of human rights by building a future professional pool of judges and prosecutors.

Israel

The main human rights objectives within the framework of the EU's relations with Israel are the situation of minorities, the preservation of a vibrant civil society, and respect for the laws of armed conflict and international human rights law, which covers Israel's responsibilities as an occupying power and includes issues relating to children and armed conflict.

In the course of 2015, the EU raised concerns and questions in relation to the economic and social rights of the Arab and Bedouin minorities, and to policies on asylum seekers, including their relocation to third countries. The EU also voiced its concern over Israel's demolition of humanitarian and other structures in Area C of the West Bank.

The EU closely followed the proposed NGO legislation that would place new requirements on NGOs which receive more than half of their funding from foreign government sources, and called on Israel to promote its active NGO sector and civil society, which are a fundamental element of Israel's vibrant democracy and of the shared values that underpin EU-Israel relations.

In its Foreign Affairs Council conclusions of July 2015, the EU stressed the need for compliance with international humanitarian law and international human rights law by states and non-state actors, emphasising the importance of accountability as a cornerstone of peace and security in the region.

Furthermore, the EU expressed its concerns on repeated occasions over the increased violence in the autumn of 2015 in Israel and the West Bank, notably East Jerusalem, through statements as well as bilateral and multilateral engagement. The EU has highlighted the need for all sides to do their utmost to prevent further violence.

Human rights issues were raised with the Israeli authorities on a regular basis in various formats. The Informal Working Groups on Human Rights and International Organisations and the Subcommittee on Political Dialogue were postponed upon request of the Israeli authorities. The Subcommittee on Migration, Health and Social Affairs (13-14 July, Brussels) addressed asylum policies, among other matters, with a particular focus on irregular migrants. The EU maintained a strong relationship with civil society organisations through regular consultations and by attending and organising NGO briefings. The EU Delegation also regularly undertook public diplomacy activities focused on human rights issues, including the organisation of two diplomatic outreach events, speeches and participation in other events.

Furthermore, the EU-Israel seminar on combating racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism took place in Brussels in December 2015 and examined policies and tools to combat racism and xenophobia, with a particular focus on anti-Semitism.

The EU also contributed to the achievement of the human rights objectives through grants awarded to projects carried out by civil society organisations and others. EU support, channelled mainly through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), focused on the priority areas: reinforcing a favourable environment for civil society organisations and the promotion of human rights; advancing the rights of vulnerable groups or minorities within Israel; and enhancing respect for international humanitarian law and human rights in the occupied Palestinian territory, including the rights of children in armed conflict. Twenty-eight EIDHR projects were ongoing or signed in 2015. The CSO-LA (civil society organisations and local authorities) programme also contributed to the objectives of the HRCS by mainstreaming the inclusion of civil society organisations in local decision making and enhancing civic participation through five ongoing contracts with small Arab municipalities in 2015.

Palestine*³

Palestinian refugees in the West Bank (approximately 800,000) and in the Gaza Strip (approximately 1 million) were confronted with a multitude of challenges in 2015. They continued to endure difficult economic and social conditions and deepening poverty. There was a considerable increase in violence and growing frustration with a stagnant economy and increasing lack of employability in the West Bank. Food security was granted to approximately 75% of Palestinian refugees living in refugee camps. In the Gaza strip, refugees suffered from further displacements following the hostilities in July and August 2014. The living conditions of many refugees have further deteriorated because of the impact of the closure of the Gaza strip in 2015. UNRWA, with substantial EU financial support, ensured the delivery of core essential services (i.p. food and health care) for refugees in Gaza.

The accession by Palestine to 18 international human rights, humanitarian, international criminal law, arms and diplomatic treaties on 31 December 2014, which came into effect in the course of 2015, has led to an increased awareness among security forces and government officials of Palestinian obligations regarding human rights, which have become part of the public discourse. However, this increased awareness has not yet translated into substantial improvements in practice.

³ *This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual position of the Member States on this issue.

The EU undertook a variety of actions in the course of 2015 in support of human rights in Palestine. Locally, via the Office of the EU Representative, the EU issued local statements, made site visits and attended court hearings. Throughout 2015, the EU closely followed developments, and raised concerns in regard to respect for human rights. The EU-Palestine Sub-committee on Human Rights, Good Governance and the Rule of Law did not take place in the course of 2015; it is planned for early 2016.

Although there continued to be a relatively positive environment in the West Bank in terms of respect for freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of the media, there remained causes for concern, for example journalists and bloggers being called in for questioning about posts on social media and blogs. Regarding freedom of association, while civil society organisations could generally operate freely in the West Bank, concerns persisted regarding the role of the NGO Affairs Committee established in December 2012, and a new regulation on not-for-profit corporations issued in 2015 which requires them to seek prior approval from the Council of Ministers in order to accept grants, donations, assistance and funding, and to state the purpose of such funding. All civil society platforms regard this new regulation as a serious violation of the freedom of association and a breach of the Palestinian Basic Law.

In Gaza, the right to freedom of expression remained under severe pressure with journalists being attacked by the de facto authority's security forces. Restrictions were also imposed on journalists' movements. Notwithstanding the Beach Camp Agreement on reconciliation between Hamas and the PLO, the work of civil society organisations in Gaza continued to be impeded by officials from the de facto authorities. The EU and its Member States continued to support the work of civil society organisations to promote human rights in Gaza. In the Strip, 40 000 civil servants are not being paid, which has resulted in increased rates of corruption as well as human rights violations such as torture by the police.

Other key concerns continue to be the death penalty, even though no executions were performed in 2015, and regular complaints of torture and ill-treatment in detention centres in both Gaza and West Bank. The EU continues to support local civil society organisations to prevent and combat torture. The work of EUPOL COPPS⁴ in training the Palestinian police in human rights is also noteworthy. Regular complaints of arbitrary detention were lodged with the Independent Commission on Human Rights, including complaints of violations of the right to due process of law, detention without providing fair trial guarantees, and detention upon the orders of the Governor.

As regards freedom of religion or belief and the rights of people belonging to a minority, Christians were well-represented at the political level. However, many Christians, along with secular Muslims, complained of increasing pressure in Palestinian society to accommodate conservative Islamic values, especially in Gaza.

Violence against women and their overall socio-economic vulnerability remained challenges for Palestinian society. As an important positive step, in 2014 President Abbas issued a decree amending the Penal Code to remove the power of the judiciary to take into account certain 'mitigating factors' when sentencing in cases of 'honour killings'. However, another provision remains in place, which gives any family member of the victim the right to relinquish his or her rights, following which a case is often dropped.

The use of children in the labour market continued to be a concern, with 3.5 % of all children aged between 10 and 17 in employment in Palestine.

Persons with disabilities continued to suffer from social exclusion and a lack of access to appropriate care, especially persons with mental disabilities. EU partnership with local authorities, ministries and civil society to address this concern has begun to yield results, for example in East Jerusalem an EU programme helped introduce support for children with special needs in the education sector.

Human rights permeate all aspects of the development cooperation of the European Union, the biggest multilateral donor of financial assistance. EU cooperation aims to build up the institutions of a future democratic, independent, contiguous and viable Palestinian state based on shared values in areas such as respect for human rights, democratisation and the rule of law.

⁴ European Union Police Mission for the Palestinian Territories

Jordan

Overall, developments in Jordan were significantly marked by a further escalation of tension and instability in the region, which had an impact on the country notably through the continuing Syrian refugee crisis, and further highlighted Jordan's political, security and socio-economic vulnerability.

Jordan's leadership reinforced its international and national focus on counter-terrorism/extremism measures following the killing by Da'esh of a Jordanian Air Force pilot whom the organisation had taken hostage. An atmosphere of further 'securisation' at the national level was noted, along with a shrinking space for freedom of expression and for civil society overall (e.g. the decree on foreign funding for CSOs).

Counter-terrorism provisions were increasingly used to detain and prosecute activists and journalists for speech-related offences (including on social media), relying largely on the amendments to the Anti-Terrorism Law, the new interpretation of articles of the Electronic transaction law and the use of the State Security Court. In February, the State Security Court sentenced a senior Muslim Brotherhood leader, Zaki Bani Rusheid, to 18 months for 'harming relations with a foreign state' (UAE).

The EU and its Member States continued to engage with the authorities and civil society on political and social reform and on human rights issues, including through the Human Rights Working Group. Areas of particular focus were freedom of the media, freedom of expression, women/gender, the role of civil society, the death penalty and torture, as well as the follow-up to the 2013 Universal Periodic Review.

In this regard, the Human Rights Government Coordinator prepared a table of all recommendations and concrete actions and tasks were assigned. Efforts were also continued to develop a National Plan for Human Rights.

On 21 December 2014, Jordan broke its de facto moratorium on the use of the death penalty, applied since March 2006, by executing 11 people. A further two executions took place in early 2015, both Iraqis who were long-term death row inmates affiliated with al-Qaeda Iraq.

A committee chaired by the Ministry of Justice proposed amendments to at least 180 articles of the 1960 Penal Code. These still need to be reviewed by the parliament. While the draft contains positive changes (e.g. providing alternatives to imprisonment, such as community service), significant changes to some of the sensitive and problematic articles (references to honour crimes, torture and rape) may well be difficult.

In November, the third review of Jordan's implementation of the Convention against Torture (CAT) took place. The review highlighted a number of remaining challenges, including the definition of torture, inadequate penalties, overcrowding in detention centres, the provision of legal aid, independence and transparency in police investigations, and the use of special courts (perpetrators – most of whom are from the police force – are referred to the police court rather than a civilian court).

There has been no significant progress on the situation of women. In 2015, the authorities started providing special 'privileges' to non-citizen children of Jordanian women (married to foreigners), including special ID cards. With this approach the government notably backtracked from the promise it made in 2014 of granting them 'civil rights'. The government maintained its reservations on the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Articles 9 on nationality and 16 on marriage, divorce and family relations). In 2015, Jordan's rank in the Gender Gap Index further deteriorated to 140th out of 145 countries.

Jordan continued working on a number of important political reform bills on elections and the Independent Electoral Commission, political parties, decentralisation and municipalities, notably in preparation for the parliamentary, local, municipal and governorate elections to be held in the coming years. With these bills, Jordan will address a number of issues related to political participation. Jordan also passed a new law on juvenile justice.

The deteriorated security environment and increased radicalisation in the region led Jordan to intensify its call for 'religious moderation' and inter-faith dialogue.

The EU, under the ENI and EIDHR budget line, provided support for a range of initiatives in these and other areas, including civil society capacity building, the political participation of women and civil society, training for journalists, technical assistance to the media, justice sector reform, the rule of law, and women's rights and gender-based violence. The European Endowment for Democracy also extended support to several stakeholders in Jordan.

The EU Delegation and the Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO) office closely followed the humanitarian and human rights situation of refugees, including those stranded at the berm (the 'no man's land' at Jordan's north-eastern border with Syria, where 12 500 Syrian refugees have gathered). The issue was discussed with Member States and raised with the authorities by the EU Head of Delegation.

The EU made a number of demarches on international human rights issues, including those discussed at the UNGA Third Committee and the Human Rights Council. The Jordanian authorities responded with constructive support on all of these.

Lebanon

The deepening of the political, social, and economic and security crisis in Lebanon in 2015 had an impact on the overall human rights situation. The existing institutional and political crisis reached a new level of severity with the stalling of the meetings of the Council of Ministers as of June. This in turn severely affected citizens' access to public services and led to street movements throughout the months of August to October to protest against the lack of government accountability. Given the institutional stalemate, many of the pressing reforms in the area of human rights could not be advanced, such as the criminalisation of torture and the parliamentary endorsement of the National Action Plan on Human Rights.

Consequently, the most important human rights challenges in Lebanon remain the prevention of incidents of torture and arbitrary detention, the alignment of prison conditions with international standards, the abolition of the death penalty, the promotion of full equality between women and men, improved living conditions for refugees, protection for migrants and other vulnerable groups, and the fight against discrimination. The functioning and efficiency of key democratic institutions such as the parliament and the judiciary, as well as freedom of expression online and offline, need to be further improved, as prerequisites for the full implementation of human rights.

The consequences of the crisis in Syria are being increasingly felt. The growing number of refugees, the increased political tension and the fragile security situation, with a number of security incidents in the main cities and border areas, posed substantial challenges to Lebanon's internal stability and economic and social situation. They also brought about additional challenges in the area of human rights, for example in relation to the right to education, questions of non-refoulement, etc. While security agencies are increasingly aware of such challenges and the means to address them (in part thanks to the extent of the support provided by the EU, the EU Member States and other international donors), there are still significant issues with implementation, in relation to both Lebanese citizens and Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

The EU continued to address these priority areas through bilateral policy dialogues and through various programmes, for example through projects implemented under the thematic line of the EIDHR and the bilateral ENI for a total amount of EUR 5.02 million (EUR 1.2 million was to be contracted before the end of 2015 using funds from the EIDHR) and through support to the justice sector amounting to a total of EUR 21 million, as well as further programmes to improve the performance of democratic institutions.

Syria

In five years of civil war, Syria has transformed into the world's largest humanitarian disaster. The Foreign Affairs Council conclusions of 12 October 2015 noted 'the scale of the tragedy, having killed 250 000 men, women and children, displaced 7.6 million inside the country and sent over 4 million fleeing into neighbouring and other countries'. The conclusions also reiterated the EU objectives for human rights and democracy, asking for a political solution to the crisis on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué of 2012 and on the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR), so as to bring stability, peace and reconciliation and end the indiscriminate targeting of civilians by all parties in conflict, as subsequently summed up in UNSCR 2254 adopted in December 2015.⁵

⁵ 'The EU's objective is to bring an end to the conflict and enable the Syrian people to live in peace in their own country. The international community has to unite around two complementary and interlinked tracks – a political one that aims to bring an end to the civil war by addressing all the root causes of the conflict and establish an inclusive political transition process that will restore peace to the country – and a security one to focus on the fight against the regional and global threat of Da'esh.'

The EU has condemned the excessive and indiscriminate attacks of the Syrian regime against civilians, the constant mass killings, the use of barrel bombs and the use of chemical substances as well as the use of starvation as a weapon against civilian population trapped in besieged areas. The EU has expressed concern over the Syrian regime's prosecution and imprisonment of civil society activists and the extensive use of torture against political opponents and human rights defenders, as described in the Caesar Report. The particularity of the Syrian war lies in the length of time during which human rights violations have been committed by all parties in the conflict, including opposition armed groups. Terrorist groups such as Da'esh are also responsible for attacks against civilians, public executions, the persecution and massive executions of religious and ethnic minorities, conflict-related sexual exploitation and abuse of women and children, the use of child soldiers, massive abuses against the civilian population living in Da'esh-occupied territories, and the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage. The EU has reaffirmed on numerous occasions its support for the prosecution of all perpetrators of war crimes and human rights abuses.

The EU has committed to supporting all efforts to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court, and to scale up the implementation of UNSC resolutions 2139, 2165, 2191 and 2258 to deliver cross-border and cross-line assistance to help the Syrian population in need. The EU also supports the efforts of the Global Coalition to counter Da'esh in Syria and in Iraq.

The EU has continued dialogue with civil society organisations and human rights activists with the aim of supporting their efforts to help the Syrian population and to account for the crimes committed by state and non-state actors inside the country. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights funds some civil society organisations working to promote human rights and the strengthening of human rights defenders.

The European Parliament adopted several resolutions during 2015 drawing attention to the arbitrary detention and disappearance of independent journalists and human rights defenders by the Syrian regime, the attacks by Da'esh against Syrian minorities, the destruction of cultural heritage in Palmyra, and the need for humanitarian aid in the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp seized by Da'esh.

The EU supported the adoption in November 2015 of the UNGA Third Committee resolution on the situation in Syria, which condemned the escalation of violence in the country, the use of barrel bombs by the Syrian authorities and human rights abuses by armed extremist groups, and asked for parties to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and ensure unhindered access for aid organisations in Syria.

The EU has continued its restrictive measures (a ban on trade in oil and petroleum products, a ban on financial transactions, etc.) in relation to Syria and has regularly introduced new sanctions against individuals and entities – including military and security officials – responsible for violence and repression in Syria. More than 200 individuals and more than 60 entities have been added to the sanctions list in the last four years. The EU is also implementing the UN-based sanctions regime against al-Qaeda and Da'esh in accordance with UN Resolution 2253.

The EU and its Member States have already provided EUR 4.7 billion for relief and recovery assistance to those affected by the conflict inside Syria and to refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries. The EU and its Member States will continue to provide humanitarian assistance through the UN, ICRC and international NGOs. At the same time, the EU will increase its longer-term development and stabilisation assistance to these and other partners, including through the EU Regional Trust Fund established in response to the Syrian crisis (the 'Madad Fund'). The EU is committed to intensifying humanitarian diplomacy and seeking ways to improve access to people in need inside Syria, including by supporting local ceasefires and the reduction of violence between parties in conflict.

Algeria

In 2015 Algeria was confronted with regional security challenges linked to the situation in Libya and the Sahel. A persistent fall in oil prices has seriously affected Algeria's finances, resulting in the adoption by the authorities of several austerity measures. Domestic politics were dominated by a new announcement of an impending constitutional reform.

The EU and Algeria continued to address human rights throughout 2015 in several bilateral meetings and consultations, notably the Sub-committee on Political Dialogue, Security and Human Rights held in February, the Association Committee in April, the Association Council in Brussels in June and the Sub-committee on Justice and Home Affairs in October. Moreover, several Algerian representatives of associations, NGOs and unions visited Brussels and held meetings with EU institutions.

Several demarches concerning human rights were made by the EU in Algiers throughout 2015. From January to November 2015, 41 new cases of human rights violations in Algeria concerning 190 people were reported to the EU. These included a blogger, journalists and a cartoonist, as well as activists and students. In most instances the complaints were related to freedom of assembly and association. The arrest in Laghouat of a group of activists campaigning for the rights of the unemployed was of particular concern. It was denounced by international NGOs and it prompted the EU Parliament to adopt an Urgency Resolution (30 March 2015). Although in most cases the detainees were released, human rights defenders point to the deterrent effect of these arrests vis-à-vis other potential protesters.

The Associations Law from 2012 continued to be denounced as obtrusive and counter-productive by civil society organisations. By October 2015, an EU-funded report found that at least two thirds of the 93 000 associations legally registered in Algeria prior to the 2012 law had either disappeared or had been unable to renew their registration. Several NGOs accused the Algerian authorities of applying the law arbitrarily, with negative consequences for associations working on politically sensitive issues in particular. International NGOs (both European and regional) have reported that their visa applications are being systematically rejected by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Fund transfers to Algeria are likewise blocked, including to those NGOs legally registered and working in partnership with the EU. None of the existing five Human Rights Leagues have received official permission to operate. Some of their members have been arrested (such as Ali Attar, who went on hunger strike, and Hassan Bouras) and are awaiting trial. The Network of Lawyers for Human Rights does not enjoy legal status either. Independent trade unions are tolerated but complain of harassment. They argue that Algeria has still not implemented the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) recommendations on Convention 87 on the right to organise, and they contend that the working environment worsened in 2015.

Although Algeria was ranked higher than its neighbours in 2015 in terms of freedom of the press by the NGO Reporters without Borders, independent journalists continued to report pressure from the authorities. In October, Al Watan TV, a private TV outlet, was shut down. The authorities argued that the TV chain did not have an official permit to operate and was not in compliance with regulations. The closure was criticised by international civil society, which pointed out that most other private TV stations in the country do not enjoy official recognition either.

Algeria has signed but not yet ratified the UN Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances. Although the country has ratified the Convention against Torture, the UN Committee on Torture found Algeria in violation of its obligations under the Convention (August 2015) because it failed to cooperate and initiate an investigation on the case of Hachemi Boukhalfa, who was allegedly tortured by the Algerian DRS⁶ in 2011.

In December, the Popular Assembly adopted a law modifying the Penal Code to penalise domestic violence against women for the first time. The new law includes a broad definition of violence, be it physical or psychological, social or economic, and establishes that perpetrators may be sentenced to severe prison terms. The adoption of the text represents a major milestone in achieving gender equality after months of heated discussions in parliament.

Algeria has been co-sponsoring, alongside the EU, the UN moratorium on the death penalty resolution since 2007 and has upheld its own moratorium ever since.

⁶ Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS)

Morocco

In 2015 the EU continued to engage with Morocco on the promotion of human rights and democracy, in line with the principles enshrined in Morocco's 2011 constitution and the international commitments on human rights made by the Moroccan authorities. EU-Morocco relations were developed in this respect through bilateral political dialogues, high-level visits (EUSR for Human Rights Lambrinidis in January 2015, HR/VP Mogherini in July 2015, and the EU-Morocco Association Council on 14 December 2015), and a thematic human rights dialogue – notably in the framework of the Sub-committee on Human Rights, Democracy and Governance (October 2015) – as well as through regular exchanges with civil society. The visit of the EUSR underlined the EU's commitment and continued support to Morocco in fully implementing the human rights provisions of its new Constitution. Given Morocco's key regional role, the EUSR also encouraged closer EU-Morocco cooperation in the region and in multilateral fora.

Select issues discussed included justice reform, the rights of women and girls, the recent Moroccan ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT), freedom of expression and of the media, freedom of association and of assembly, the death penalty, migration, and Western Sahara (notably in the context of draft laws under consideration in the government or in parliament). Support to civil society and combating religious intolerance were other focus areas during the visit.

In 2015, at the request of Moroccan authorities, the EU organised an election expert mission (EEM) to follow up on the local and regional electoral process. Substantial financial assistance was made available in support of human rights and democracy.

The EU and Morocco continued their cooperation in multilateral fora, in particular in the UN Human Rights Council, of which Morocco is a member (2014-2016). In the Council, Morocco continues to play a proactive role in several thematic initiatives in the field of economic, social and cultural rights.

Four years after the adoption of the 2011 constitution, 10 organic laws out of a total of 19 have been adopted by the Moroccan Parliament. The organic laws related to further regionalisation were adopted in July, just before the local and regional elections in September.

Important legislative processes and societal debates were launched in 2015, including the reform of the justice sector and of local democracy, and debates on the death penalty and gender equality. Several important bills were nonetheless still under discussion in the parliament at the end of 2015, namely those concerning the High Judicial Council and the status of judges, the right of access to information, the right to present legislative proposals and to launch a petition, gender (violence against women), the creation of the Authority for Equality and the Fight against all Forms of Discrimination (APALD), the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities, the trafficking of human beings, freedom of expression and of the media, and the reform of the Penal Code. Civil society is critical of certain draft laws that only partially meet the ambitions of the new constitution. This criticism was especially voiced with regard to the draft revised Penal Code.

Throughout 2015, the EU continued to encourage Morocco to accelerate the reform processes, in order to respect the initial timeline set for their adoption (which was the end of the current legislature) and the commitments made in the 2011 constitution.

The EU welcomed the Moroccan parliament's adoption of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

2015 was also marked by shortcomings in terms of respect for and the implementation of freedom of expression and association. Civil society and human rights defenders reported several instances where the actions of civil society and journalists were restricted. The EU continued to encourage the Moroccan authorities to enhance cooperation with civil society and to establish an inclusive reform process. The death penalty is still in place but no executions have been carried out since 1993. Despite the fact that the draft Penal Code significantly reduces the number of crimes punishable by death, it does still maintain the death penalty. In 2015, Morocco continued to develop its comprehensive national policy on migration, which represents a good example in the region. However, the situation of migrants remains of some concern. The key laws in the field of migration (trafficking, asylum and migration in general) are still to be adopted, and migrants' access to basic social services remains challenging.

In terms of financial assistance, in October the EU adopted a number of cooperation programmes, for a total amount of EUR 195 million under the 2015 ENI budget, which will provide support to a number of important reform processes, including the reform of the penitentiary system. A substantial programme of EUR 75.5 million to support the independence, efficiency and effectiveness of the judiciary (financed under the 2014 budget) was signed in December 2015.

The EU's financial assistance was also dedicated to the support of national human rights institutions (the National Council of Human Rights and the Interministerial Delegation on Human Rights) and to civil society's role of promoting, monitoring and following up on the human rights situation (through existing EIDHR and Civil Society Facility projects in the fields of good governance, health, the rights of persons with disabilities, and the fight against the death penalty).

Tunisia

Tunisia's transition continued in 2015, with considerable progress made since 2011 in terms of governance, as well as respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The awarding of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet underlined the exceptional nature of this peaceful transition and the need to consolidate its achievements.

The Nobel Prize paid tribute to Tunisia's vibrant civil society, including the main trade union and employers' organisation, which plays a crucial role in the continuing transition, and which the EU aims to reinforce through various means: direct funding to NGOs, an ambitious support programme to civil society to help improve the capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs), a regional project on the promotion of social dialogue, the participation of CSOs in the management of EU-Tunisia cooperation programmes, and systematic tripartite consultations (the EU, the Tunisian authorities, CSOs) before every formal meeting of the EU-Tunisia privileged partnership.

Following the completion of electoral processes in 2014, the year 2015 brought to the forefront the serious interconnected challenges that the Tunisian democratic transition is facing: the need to consolidate democratic reforms in the face of serious security threats and a difficult socio-economic situation. With the aim of implementing the new constitution, the government took first steps to create the independent bodies it provides for, and to undertake the much-needed reform of the justice and security sectors, which is supported by EU assistance programmes (new programmes launched in April and September 2015, respectively).

The main challenge is still that the new rights and freedoms guaranteed by a modern, inclusive and democratic constitution – including in regard to freedom of speech and assembly, gender equality and the fight against discrimination, domestic violence, and the fight against torture and corruption – must be translated into the legislation inherited from the previous regime (especially the Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the 'Personal Status' Code), as well as into administrative practices. In these areas, EU assistance to the Tunisian authorities as well as to CSOs aims to provide expertise and build the capacities needed to prepare and implement reforms.

Notwithstanding delays with regard to the deadlines set by the constitution, in November 2015 the parliament took important steps towards improving the independence of the judiciary by adopting organic laws on the Superior Judicial Council and the Constitutional Court. Other bodies designed to scrutinise respect for human rights, fight against corruption and prevent the use of torture are yet to be functional. The transitional justice process, conducted through the *Instance Vérité et Dignité* (Truth and Dignity Commission, IVD) created at the end of 2014, is facing a number of obstacles, highlighting the resistance of some political and economic groups to its successful completion.

. Three major terrorist attacks occurred in 2015 – targeting tourists at the Bardo Museum in March and at a Sousse hotel in June, then the presidential guard in central Tunis in November – and there were continuous smaller-scale attacks on security forces in the mountainous western region and killings of civilians accused of spying for the authorities. The authorities have shown increasing openness to discussing security-related issues with international partners, and an EU-Tunisia political dialogue on the fight against terrorism took place in September 2015. Human rights defenders consider the new Anti-terrorism Law adopted in July 2015 to be insufficiently protective of constitutional rights and freedoms, noting in particular the broad definition of terrorism that could be detrimental to freedom of expression, and the duration of custody (up to 15 days without a lawyer). Civil society is also increasingly concerned by the growing number of reported cases of torture and mistreatment in detention – with three cases of suspicious deaths in 2015 – and by the continued impunity of the security forces.

Tunisians generally enjoy the personal freedoms guaranteed by the new Constitution. Nevertheless, in 2015 the repression of homosexuality was illustrated by several troubling cases, in particular by the sentencing in September 2015 of a young student following a forced 'medical' test. This case raised questions relating to the conformity of the law repressing homosexuality (Article 230 of the Penal Code) with the new constitution, which guarantees non-discrimination and respect for private life. It also caused serious concern over respect for the physical integrity of the individual during the judicial process. In December 2015, the sentencing of six students to three years' imprisonment and five years' banishment from the city of Kairouan for homosexuality confirmed a pattern which highlights the need to reform the legislation in accordance with the new constitution.

Significant steps have been taken to tackle the problem of torture, including important work for the establishment of a National Preventative Mechanism (NPM), in line with Tunisia's obligations under OPCAT. The NPM will carry out surprise visits on places of detention and investigate allegations of torture. At the administrative level, some old regime attitudes persist and allegations of ill-treatment continue to surface, particularly in prisons and detention facilities.

Tunisia's constitution provides for gender equality, non-discrimination and equality of opportunities between genders, and the representation of women in political life experienced significant improvements following the 2014 elections (with women accounting for 31 % of members of parliament) thanks to the introduction of vertical parity in the electoral law. However, women in Tunisia continue to face discrimination in regard to access to the labour market and low participation in public life and public office. Violence against women (including domestic violence) remains a cause for great concern; the government's draft law on this matter is being finalised with the support of an EU-funded project.

Under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, a new call for proposals was launched in April 2015, with EUR 2.4 million at its disposal to support NGOs in areas such as democratic consolidation, torture, and migrants' rights.

Western Sahara

Western Sahara's territory is considered a non-self-governing territory by the United Nations. There is an ongoing UN-led process that assists the parties to achieve a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara in the context of arrangements consistent with the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations. The EU has been supporting this process over the past years.

UNSC resolution 2218 (2015) extended the mandate of MINURSO (a UN peacekeeping mission) in Western Sahara until 30 April 2016. In 2015, as in previous years, the EU repeatedly expressed concern about the long duration of the conflict and its implications for security, human rights and cooperation in the region. UNSC resolution 2218(2015) also decided that the United Nations Security Council is to remain seized of the matter. As such, the EU will not take any initiative that might undermine this UN-led process.

In 2015, the EU insisted on the importance of improving the human rights situation in Western Sahara and in the Tindouf camps, and welcomed the strengthening of the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH) regional commissions operating in Dakhla and Laayoune. The EU encouraged the parties to work with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to re-examine and reinforce confidence building measures as much as possible.

The EU closely follows the human rights situation in Morocco and Western Sahara. Human rights issues are regularly discussed with the Moroccan authorities in the context of political dialogue, including within the framework of the Sub-committee on Human Rights, Democracy and Governance. The EU Delegation in Rabat is in contact with several human rights defenders and civil society organisations. The EU Delegation follows up on alleged individual cases of human rights violations, and is in regular contact with the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH) and its regional offices, including in Western Sahara.

Libya

Libya is still facing a challenging political transition. The UN-facilitated Libyan Political Dialogue ran throughout 2015. The Libyan Political Agreement was signed on 17 December 2015 in Skhirat (Morocco) and a Presidential Council was appointed. A Government of National Accord (GNA) should be formed within the deadlines proposed in the Libyan Political Agreement.

Despite some progress on the political process, many areas of the country are still under threat of violent confrontation and terrorist attacks. As a consequence, the human rights situation in Libya continued to deteriorate in 2015, with civilians bearing the brunt of ongoing fighting, insecurity and the breakdown of law and order. Over the last year, armed groups attacked civilians and civilian property, with some human rights violations amounting to war crimes. There were serious violations of international law, including arbitrary detention, torture and unlawful killings, with Libya's institutions, particularly its judiciary, in a state of near collapse.

The ongoing fighting in Libya since the start of 2015 led to a doubling in the number of displaced people in the country compared with 2014. There are an estimated 430 000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Libya. Almost 300 000 of them are located in the western region of Libya. Over 125 000 IDPs are in the east, with Benghazi alone hosting over 115 000 of them. There are an estimated 250 000 vulnerable refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Libya. They remain at risk of indefinite detention in harsh conditions, violent attacks, rape and exploitation at the hands of armed groups, criminal gangs and the police. Thousands of migrants and refugees are being held in the 15 official migrant detention centres. The conditions in these centres are extremely precarious, as they are overcrowded and the detainees have little access to basic goods and services. Some are run by local militia groups and are largely inaccessible to humanitarian organisations.

Human Rights Watch has reported that thousands of people are exposed to long-term arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment. A large number of detainees in four detention facilities, have been imprisoned for up to four years without being brought before a judge, receiving any form of judicial review or being charged with an offence, and without there being any apparent legal basis for their detention.

Armed groups continue to abduct civilians on account of their family links, identity, or actual or perceived political affiliations.

In a report published in September 2015, the Coalition of Libyan Human Rights Organisations counted 70 attacks on journalists, resulting in nine deaths. On 24 February, the popular blogger, civil rights activist and founder of the Tanweer organisation, Intisar al-Hasiri, and her aunt were found murdered in Tripoli. A growing threat to journalists is currently being reported.

Human rights defenders (HRDs) have become a primary target of armed groups. The Benghazi offices of the National Council for Civil Liberties and Human Rights (NCCLHR), Libya's national human rights institution, were raided on 16 March 2015. An employee of the Benghazi branch, who said that the institution's activities in Benghazi had been frozen since October 2014, reported surviving an assassination attempt in January. The NCCLHR headquarters in Tripoli have been closed since November 2014. The institution itself has become a victim of the political polarisation in the country. The Tripoli-based General National Congress appointed a new board when the term of the Council expired at the end of 2014, but it is not recognised by the international community.

An EU human rights mission took place in February 2015 in order to follow up on the first Human Rights Country Strategy for Libya (adopted in 2014). The mission identified an urgent need to provide support and protection to human rights defenders and civil society organisations, in order for them to be able to monitor and document the current violations, to engage in international advocacy activities and to offer direct assistance to victims of human rights violations. As a consequence, a program to support HRDs was scheduled to start in early 2016 (funded through the EIDHR). The EIDHR emergency facility was activated on two occasions in 2015 to support Libyan human rights defenders.

Several projects were revised in order to respond to the most urgent needs of displaced persons and migrants, both in terms of humanitarian assistance and protection. Refugees, asylum seekers and irregular migrants are facing increasing violations of their fundamental rights and finding it increasingly difficult to survive in hostile environments, where detention is becoming more and more arbitrary and conditions in detention centres are deteriorating dramatically. Support (direct assistance, protection, health care provision) is provided to migrants inside the detention centres and in the communities, and voluntary repatriation is proposed to migrants stranded in Libya who are willing to return to their home country.

In the media sector, the 'Media in Libya' project offers training to professionals in journalism ethics and in reporting in hostile environments and crisis zones; it also supported the establishment of the Libyan Cloud Agency as a means to foster journalistic independence, freedom of the media, and thereby pluralism.

Through several projects dedicated to transitional processes, one of the main objectives is to promote good governance and the rule of law. At present, these projects focus in particular on local governance, to improve the municipal councils' ability to govern and deliver adequate services, and to increase the participation of Libyan civil society organisations in the political processes and in local affairs.

IV. Russia and Central Asia

Russia

In 2015, the EU continued to call on Russia to fully abide by its international human rights obligations in the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the OSCE. Given that no EU-Russia summits have taken place since 28 January 2014, and that human rights consultations remained suspended due to Russia's refusal to conduct them in a meaningful format, possibilities to raise human rights issues with the Russian authorities were limited. However, the EU made its growing concerns clear in a number of senior official meetings, in international fora and through public statements.

The overall operating environment for human rights and civil society organisations in Russia continued to be characterised by insecurity, general anxiety and mistrust, with sustained pressure on civil society organisations (CSOs) and political opposition. Degradation in the protection of human rights and limitations on fundamental freedoms remain the underlying trends, and resulted in a 33% reduction in the number of registered NGOs between 2012 and 2015.

The implementation of existing restrictive legislation continued in 2015, together with the introduction of new legislative instruments further curtailing fundamental freedoms. The implementation of the law on 'foreign agents' continued with the inclusion of a growing number of organisations in the Ministry of Justice's registry of 'foreign agents'. While at the end of 2014 there were 30 NGOs labelled as 'foreign agents', at the end of 2015 the number had reached 111.

The new law on 'foreign and international undesirable organisations' entered into force in June 2015. This law allows the General Prosecutor's Office to declare as 'undesirable' a foreign or international organisation which 'threatens the foundation of the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, the defence capability of the country or the security of the state'. Such organisations are prohibited from operating on Russian territory. Russian entities and citizens who cooperate with the 'undesirable organisation' are subject to penalties ranging from administrative sanctions to criminal charges. By the end of the year, four organisations, all based in or with strong links to the US, had been included in the new registry, while some foreign donors had pre-emptively discontinued their activities in Russia. On several occasions the EU expressed its concern over this law and the ensuing listing of entities, which constitute a further restriction on the space for civil society in Russia and a significant drain of financial resources from the activities of civil society organisations.

In December, Russia adopted a new law allowing the Russian Constitutional Court to subject to scrutiny and potentially disregard decisions by international human rights organisations or bodies of which Russia is a member, and in particular those by the European Court of Human Rights, which has often been the only judicial body to recognise abuses of human rights in Russia. The EU expressed concern over this new law in the session of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe held on 16 December.

The 2014 law limiting the stake of foreign owners in Russian media organisations to 20 % led in 2015 to the departure of most foreign media companies from Russia. Media freedom was also curtailed by the disproportionate use of legislation on extremist content of publications, and by a presidential decree classifying as 'state secret' information about military casualties during special operations in peacetime.

In the light of this increasingly difficult environment, contacts with Russian CSOs were stepped up in Russia and in Brussels. The EU Delegation in Russia and the Member States continued their practice of attending human rights-related trials and of visiting human rights NGOs across the country. In September, the EU Delegation hosted a workshop with Russian human rights defenders. EU representatives also participated in the General Assembly of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum (CSF) in Budapest in December. The EU supports the CSF with a grant of EUR 1.2 million. The EU continued to offer financial support to Russian civil society, in particular through two calls for proposals, one of EUR 4 million under the CSO Programme, and one worth EUR 6 million under the EIDHR. As a result, 17 new projects will begin implementation in 2016.

There was an increase in the number of individual cases of concern and an increase in the number of disproportionately severe prison sentences against Russian human rights activists. The EU devoted particular attention to the clear breaches of international law in the cases of Kohver, Savchenko, Sentsov and Kolchenko, and repeatedly called for their release. An urgency debate on these cases took place at the European Parliament on 10 September. The imprisonment of the environmentalist Yevgeny Vitishko (who spent most of the year in a penal colony but was released on 22 December) and the harsh sentence handed down on 7 December to human rights activist Ildar Dadin for his peaceful acts of protest were also worrisome developments.

The EU strongly condemned the killing of opposition politician Boris Nemtsov on 27 February and called for a thorough investigation. The European Parliament held an extraordinary debate on Nemtsov's murder on 11 March. His assassination added a new case to the list of unresolved murders of journalists and politicians in Russia.

Local and regional elections in many Russian municipalities and regions took place on 13 September. According to the independent monitoring organisation Golos, the elections confirmed the trend in which irregularities are shifting from election day to earlier stages of elections. The vast majority of election results were predetermined by the decisions and actions of the authorities and election commissions running the elections at the stage of nomination and registration of candidates and parties, as well as at the stage of pre-election campaigning.

Kazakhstan

The EU's human rights priorities in Kazakhstan include freedom of expression, freedom of association, conditions in detention, the right to a fair trial, women's rights and freedom of religion or belief.

Overall, the situation with regard to the application of human rights and the rule of law was mixed in 2015: there were a number of positive developments, but they were very often accompanied by actions raising significant concerns.

The government created various platforms providing for the inclusion of civil society in the public policy decision-making process. However, the effectiveness of these dialogue platforms has yet to be confirmed in practice. A number of pieces of legislation were adopted or are undergoing legislative approval, in particular the law on the financing of NGOs, the law on public councils, the law on charity organisations and the law on access to information, which, while containing some positive elements and aiming to empower civil society, restrict or may restrict in practice a number of fundamental freedoms, in particular freedom of association, expression and assembly.

The International Labour Conference considered breaches with the core ILO labour standard on Freedom of Association.

Human rights issues were raised consistently by the EU at all levels of its political dialogue with Kazakhstan throughout 2015. The annual EU-Kazakhstan human rights dialogue held in Astana in November allowed for constructive exchanges on a wide range of issues, including freedom of association, women's rights, the prevention of torture and ill-treatment of detainees, and press freedom. While acknowledging the significant efforts made by Kazakhstan to prevent the mistreatment of detainees, the EU at the same time raised its concerns in relation to pressure on independent media outlets and the possible negative implications of the new draft law on the financing of NGOs. The EU welcomed the release of a number of imprisoned human rights and labour activists, and reiterated its concerns regarding some other human rights defenders, including Vladimir Kozlov.

In September, Members of the European Parliament participating in the 13th Parliamentary Cooperation Committee met CSO representatives to raise the issues of the draft law on the financing of NGOs and the national mechanism for the prevention of torture.

The EU Delegation manages a number of human rights-related projects under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), amounting to a total of EUR 2 608 203. Projects under the EIDHR cover areas such as civil society capacity building, with a particular focus on NGOs based in rural areas; the protection of human rights defenders; and freedom of the media. Projects under the DCI cover support to rural civil society; increased participation in decision-making processes, primarily with regard to environmental issues; the empowerment of civil society to improve chemical safety; and the prevention of torture and violence against children.

Kyrgyz Republic

The EU objectives for human rights within the framework of its relations with the Kyrgyz Republic include supporting the development of an independent and impartial judiciary; eradicating torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment; improving the human rights legal and policy framework for persons belonging to national minorities; and the effective implementation of a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption.

During 2015, the EU continued to engage in human rights discussions with the Kyrgyz Republic in various formats, including the human rights dialogue held in May 2015 in Brussels. Constructive discussions covered a range of issues, including detention conditions, elections, women's rights, the rights of members of minority communities and freedom of association. The EU welcomed some significant steps taken by the government, notably the adoption of the action plan to combat torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The EU emphasised its commitment to helping strengthen the rule of law in the Kyrgyz Republic, and encouraged the Kyrgyz Republic to implement the detailed recommendations on torture prevention that were adopted at the EU-Kyrgyz Republic civil society seminar held in Osh in October 2014. The EU raised individual cases, including the case of Azimjan Askarov, an imprisoned human rights defender. The EU also recommended an acceleration of the implementation of reforms related to the administration of justice.

During 2015 there were certain worrying developments related to human rights, namely the rights of LGBTI persons, with a discriminatory legislative initiative entitled 'Ban on Propaganda of Non-traditional Relations', which passed its second reading in the parliament in June, and a proposed piece of legislation concerning the potential labelling of NGOs receiving international funding as 'foreign agents', which also passed at first reading in June. The EU is concerned that if such legislation is adopted by the parliament, its implementation would fundamentally threaten human rights. The EU systematically addressed this issue in different formats. In a resolution of 15 January, the European Parliament called on Kyrgyzstan to reject the anti-LGBTI bill.

The October parliamentary elections in the Kyrgyz Republic were a significant positive development, which stand out in the regional context and mark an important milestone in the country's democratic transition. In a statement, the HR/VP's spokesperson underscored that the elections had been competitive, orderly and peaceful.

In 2015, the EU continued to strengthen its interaction with civil society in the Kyrgyz Republic. The EU has made it systematic practice to hold civil society seminars in the Kyrgyz Republic, organising a sixth consecutive civil society seminar with the overarching topic of 'Equal rights for all, more rights for everybody' and covering the issues of women's rights, vulnerable groups (persons with disabilities and children) and freedom of expression. In January 2015, the Kyrgyz Republic went through the second cycle of the Universal Periodic Review process, accepting about 80 % of the recommendations. In October 2015, Kyrgyzstan was elected to the Human Rights Council, starting its mandate on 1 January 2016.

As regards financial cooperation under the EIDHR, great attention is paid to the prevention of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Throughout 2015, projects were implemented with the Council of Europe-Venice Commission and the UNDP to support the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of the Kyrgyz Republic and improve the quality and efficiency of constitutional justice. Issues relating to the administration of justice, anti-corruption and good governance are addressed by the EU in the Kyrgyz Republic through a large EU-funded project.

Tajikistan

In 2015, the EU focused in particular on calling for freedom of expression, uninterrupted access to information and internet freedom, as well as on supporting civil society.

Overall, the human rights situation deteriorated in the second half of the year, when important restrictions were placed on the activities of political parties and NGOs. Following violent clashes in the late summer, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRP) – one of Tajikistan's main opposition parties for almost two decades – was banned as a terrorist organisation, and its leadership was arrested. The EU issued a public statement on 1 October 2015 referring to the ban of the IRP as a further restriction on pluralism in the country and calling for fundamental freedoms in Tajikistan to be preserved. Similarly, observers reported increasing difficulties in the work of NGOs as the year progressed.

In June 2015, the EU and Tajikistan held the seventh annual human rights dialogue, which took place in Brussels for the first time. A broad range of issues were addressed, including elections, freedom of expression, women's rights, torture, freedom of religion and the situation of civil society. The EU welcomed the work of the ombudsman and encouraged the Tajik authorities to further strengthen the institutional setting, including through the planned introduction of an ombudsman for children's rights. The adoption of a state programme on the prevention of domestic violence was also acknowledged as a positive step. The EU welcomed Tajikistan's ongoing work to combat torture, but stressed the need for additional efforts to counter impunity. The EU expressed concern regarding reports of pressure on independent journalists, urged the Tajikistan authorities to cease blocking news and social media websites, and encouraged the implementation of recommendations adopted at the EU-Tajikistan civil society seminar in Dushanbe in 2014, which focused on freedom of expression. The EU expressed regret at the reported shortcomings in the March 2015 parliamentary elections. Legislative proposals that would impose new requirements on civil society organisations were identified as a matter of concern.

Human rights were also discussed at the annual EU-Tajikistan Cooperation Committee meeting in June 2015. The main issues discussed were related to freedom of expression and freedom of association, as well as access to justice and the rule of law.

A number of EIDHR projects were undertaken, including projects to promote the prevention of torture, protect the human rights of Tajik migrant workers and their families, enhance the socio-economic and cultural rights of prisoners and ex-prisoners in Tajikistan, and ensure a rapid response to the urgent and immediate legal needs of refugees and asylum seekers.

Turkmenistan

In 2015, the EU's human rights priorities in Turkmenistan were detention conditions and the prevention of torture, judicial reform, freedom of expression and freedom of association, access to information, freedom of religion, freedom of movement and the status of human rights defenders.

During the year, Turkmenistan continued to apply major restrictions on freedom of expression and the press, and journalists were subjected to harassment and arrest. The population's access to information remains very limited, with the continued blocking of international websites, contrary to the 2014 law on the internet, and the reported removal of satellite dishes from people's homes. Religious groups are subject to excessive restrictions and obstacles to registration. Human rights groups highlighted the arbitrary expropriation of property and mass demolitions in the Ashgabat area during the year.

During the annual EU-Turkmenistan human rights dialogue in Ashgabat in June 2015, and in other bilateral discussions, the EU reiterated its concern over these and other serious human rights problems in the country, called on the Turkmen authorities to share information on cases of enforced disappearances, and encouraged the adoption of a National Action Plan on Human Rights.

While the human rights situation in Turkmenistan remains very worrying, there were some positive developments in 2015. The EU welcomed the organisation by the Turkmen authorities of a visit by EU, US and UN diplomats to Dashoguz women's prison in September 2015 and encouraged Turkmenistan to organise further visits to other detention centres. Turkmenistan adopted an Action Plan on Gender Equality for 2015-2020, which included monitoring indicators for its implementation, and announced a revision of the constitution with a view to establishing an ombudsman and strengthening the judicial protection of human rights. In this context, the EU Rule of Law Platform provided support on specific related issues such as the institution of the ombudsman and the role of local government. The EU welcomed the participation of Turkmenistan's Deputy Foreign Minister in the 2015 OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw and encouraged the Turkmen government to consider issuing invitations to UN Special Procedures.

The EU held regular consultations with civil society associations in Turkmenistan and with exiled human rights activists and international NGOs working on Turkmenistan. In meetings with the government, the EU encouraged Turkmenistan to remove barriers to the establishment of independent civil society organisations and to allow international NGOs to work in the country.

Uzbekistan

The EU human rights priorities for Uzbekistan continue to include the prevention of torture, children's rights, promoting respect for the rule of law, supporting civil society development and promoting freedom of expression. The EU's priorities have encouraged and supported the government of Uzbekistan in addressing some of the very serious human rights challenges in the country, including in relation to the treatment of detainees and restrictions on civil and political rights, and in respecting its international obligations.

The EU continued to engage in human rights and democracy discussions with Uzbekistan in various settings, including the Cooperation Council (May) and the Cooperation Committee (December). The annual human rights dialogue, held in November in Tashkent, saw open discussions on a range of issues, including labour rights, freedom of association, freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, conditions in detention, the prevention of torture and ill-treatment and women's rights.

In its regular political dialogue with the Uzbek authorities, the EU welcomed the quasi-elimination of the use of child labour during the cotton harvest and the progress already made in 2015 on reducing adult forced labour, notably by keeping education and health services operational throughout the harvest and by organising a nationwide awareness-raising campaign. The EU encouraged Uzbekistan to take further steps towards complete eradication of forced and compulsory labour, to step up and broaden cooperation with the ILO on labour market reforms and the full implementation of ILO conventions, and welcomed the November resolution of the government of Uzbekistan to engage in a three-year action plan to eliminate forced labour. The EU underlined that Uzbekistan's cooperation with the ILO shows the value of engagement with the international community in addressing human rights concerns, and invited Uzbekistan to consider taking a similar approach on other human rights issues. In particular, the EU strongly encouraged the Uzbek authorities to consider issuing invitations to UN special procedures.

The EU strongly encouraged Uzbekistan to operationalise the November 2014 national action plan for the implementation of the recommendations accepted by Uzbekistan under its latest UPR. This would include signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the UNDP and setting up an independent national preventive mechanism for monitoring places of detention.

V. Africa

African Union (AU) – Joint Africa-EU Strategy

Democratic governance and human rights are at the heart of our partnership with the African continent under the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES). At the fourth Africa-EU Summit, held in Brussels in April 2014, the Heads of State or Government of both continents and the Presidents of the African Union (AU) and European Commission reiterated their commitment to the principles of good governance, democracy and the rule of law. They also agreed to work together to ensure full respect for human rights, international law and gender equality, and to fight impunity and all forms of discrimination, racism and xenophobia.

Since the EU-Africa Summit, cooperation in the area of democracy, good governance and human rights has intensified with the signature of a Joint Programming Arrangement between the AU Commission (Department of Political Affairs) and several partners, mainly the EU and its Member States, to step up support to the department's work programme.

The AU's election observation capacity has been strengthened since 1 January 2015 through a grant of EUR 6 million agreed on June 2015, and backed by technical assistance amounting to EUR 0.5 million.

The 11th AU-EU human rights dialogue took place on 24 November 2015 in Kigali, Rwanda. The dialogue was led by the AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Dr Aisha L. Abdullahi, and the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Lambrinidis. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights on both continents and to collaborating on the effective implementation of continental and international human rights instruments in the following areas: business and human rights, the link between the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the African Governance Architecture (AGA), including human rights observer missions), the ratification of international and continental human rights instruments at the national level, election observation, transitional justice policy, freedom of expression, and freedom of association. In the framework of the African Year of Human Rights with Particular Focus on the Rights of Women (2016), the AU and the EU agreed to work together to organise the high-level dialogue on the promotion and protection of human rights in Africa. A civil society seminar bringing together African and European representatives and funded under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) preceded the formal dialogue.

The EU also stepped up its support to the African human rights system and to the African Governance Architecture through direct support of around EUR 2.3 million under the European Development Fund (EDF), including core funding for an amount of EUR 1.8 million to the Pan-African Parliament and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR), and through NGO support of EUR 1.5 million to regional mechanisms under the EIDHR, addressing in particular the work of the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression and access to information, and the Special Rapporteur on women's rights from the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, as well as the Working Group on the abolition of the death penalty (three grants signed in December 2015). The EIDHR also funds an ongoing EUR 1.2 million programme to enhance the protection and the work of human rights defenders at the pan-African level.

In the framework of the Pan-African Programme's Multiannual Indicative Programme 2014-2017, EUR 48.5 million (11.43 % of the envelope) is allocated to supporting priority area 2 of the JAES Roadmap, which focuses on democracy, good governance and human rights.

In 2015, the EU approved different programmes in this area, allocating EUR 10 million to strengthening the African human rights system in order to tackle discrimination and human rights violations. This project is part of a wider approach to governance and human rights under the Pan-African Programme, which includes support to election observation and civil society organisations, and possible future support to public administration and anti-corruption measures. A EUR 5 million project was approved to support the international effort to end female genital mutilation (FGM). The major focus in the prevention of FGM is to encourage its abolishment while also addressing the needs of girls and women who suffer its consequences. The Pan-African Programme therefore includes legal and policy reforms, community-based education and dialogue, support to sexual and reproductive healthcare services and child protection systems, and nationwide communication efforts to change the societal perceptions around FGM. It will be implemented by the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

EUR 20 million was provided to support the enhanced role of civil society organisations in the dialogue with African institutions and in the implementation of initiatives to promote security, governance, human rights and gender equality. EUR 3.4 million was provided mainly to support the operationalisation of the AGA through the AU Commission (secretariat).

Peer-to-peer support was also enhanced in 2015 in areas such as election observation, cooperation between the European Parliament and the Pan-African Parliament, and cooperation between the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights and the European Court of Human Rights. Staff exchanges between institutions and the EU Visitors' Programme were also used in order to streamline the partnership in this area.

Angola

The human rights situation in Angola deteriorated during 2015, although the overall protection of human rights in the country remained above-average if the whole African continent is taken into account. The main setbacks concerned freedom of association, assembly and expression. The government has slightly increased its repression of political activists opposed to it, to the MPLA ruling party and to President José Eduardo dos Santos's long tenure of 37 years in power. As the economic situation in the country continues to deteriorate due to the prolonged fall in the price of oil, the authorities are keen to tighten control over civil society organisations and political activists, shrinking the democratic space ahead of general elections scheduled for August 2017. The government continues to target journalists and activists with criminal defamation lawsuits, arbitrary arrests, unfair trials, intimidation, harassment, and surveillance. The police have allegedly used excessive force and have engaged in arbitrary arrests to stop peaceful anti-government protests and other gatherings.

The trial against 17 young activists accused of 'preparing acts pursuant to rebellion' and 'plotting against the president and other institutions', both of which constitute crimes against the security of the state, has been the focus of intense social media attention. Criticism of the legal proceedings adopted has been frequent.

Despite having an open and constructive approach in the pre-trial period – mainly by allowing the EU and its Member States to visit prisoners in custody – Angolan authorities later changed their attitude and, to date, no diplomatic observation of the trial has been allowed. There were also questions over the access provided to the media. The EU Delegation continues to negotiate access with the Angolan authorities. The issue was brought up with the Angolan government during the Ministerial Meeting in the framework of the Joint Way Forward held in Luanda in November 2015. In December 2015, the Angolan Constitutional Court ordered the activists to be put under house arrest, a measure which has improved their situation.

The other two most prominent human rights trials during 2015 were those of Cabinda activist José Marcos Mavungo and renowned journalist-activist Rafael Marques de Morais. Marcos Mavungo was sentenced to six years in prison for 'rebellion against the state'. He had been accused of involvement in the organisation of a demonstration and of being associated with a group of men allegedly found with leaflets and explosives on the eve of a demonstration. An EU Delegation representative flew to Cabinda to observe Mavungo's trial. Meanwhile, Rafael Marques was convicted and given a six-month suspended jail term following a trial for criminal defamation for his book entitled 'Blood Diamonds: Corruption and Torture in Angola'. The trial was observed by EU Delegation and Member States' diplomats, as well as by the US.

The EU Delegation kept up a useful and fruitful dialogue with the Angolan authorities regarding these human rights concerns (including at the level of Foreign Affairs Minister and the Minister for Justice and Human Rights, as well as with the Attorney General).

With regard to economic and social rights, the current economic crisis brought about by the fall in the price of oil is having a significant impact on the most vulnerable sectors of the population. Not only have the returns on their economic activities been reduced, but the government's capacity to intervene has also considerably decreased.

The EU Delegation maintains a permanent dialogue with civil society representatives. For instance, the new NGO regulation, which is potentially restrictive of the organisations' activities, was widely discussed, both with civil society and at ministerial level.

A call for proposals was launched under the Non-State Actors-Local Authorities (NSA-LA) programme, with the aim of reinforcing the participation of civil society in the decentralisation process. In addition, the EU Delegation is closely following the implementation of eight ongoing grants from previous NSA-LA programmes.

As regards the human rights budget lines, a meeting with relevant members of civil society was held in order to identify the priorities of the forthcoming call for proposals on human rights. The call was published in January 2016 and the following two priorities were identified: access to justice with a particular focus on paralegal support to the population, and support to civic education actions in view of the forthcoming elections (2017).

During 2015, there were three European Development Fund (EDF) programmes on human rights-related topics. The UNICEF-implemented project on birth registration and access to justice for children reached a satisfactory level of implementation. The implementation of the PALOP-TL⁷ project on the rule of law to prevent and fight corruption, money laundering and drug trafficking, started in 2015.

On 10 September 2015, the European Parliament (EP) adopted a resolution on Angola's recent human rights record which called for the release of all political prisoners and human rights defenders. The resolution also noted the shrinking space for freedom of expression, assembly and association through arrests, the use of the judiciary system to repress dissent by criminally prosecuting individuals for exercising these rights, and the use of violence by security forces to repress peaceful public gatherings. The tone and wording of the EP resolution offended the Angolan government while triggering an internal debate in the country's political spheres. The Angolan parliament issued its own resolution (without the support of the opposition) condemning the EP resolution. Increasingly, government officials and state media are adopting a language of 'foreign interference', thus setting a disruptive path for the elections in 2017.

Benin

The human rights situation is generally good in Benin. In 2015, parliamentary, local and municipal elections were held, and were assessed by observers as complying with international standards for democratic elections.

The press enjoys significant freedom, even if access to public media remains more limited for the opposition and some parts of society. As regards freedom of expression, it is guaranteed by the constitution and legislative framework and the population enjoys significant freedom in this respect.

⁷ The European Union is promoting South-South cooperation among the six Portuguese-speaking countries from the African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group, known as the PALOP-TL countries (*Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa e Timor-Leste*).

The situation of children's rights remains a concern, in particular the phenomenon of exploitation, the persistence of child, early and forced marriage, the marginalisation or even infanticide of children accused of so-called witchcraft, and frequent incidents of sexual abuse in schools. The Global Slavery Index 2014 believes that some 77 000 people are victims of modern slavery in Benin, mainly through domestic work, forced labour and sexual exploitation.

Common practices of tax evasion and corruption weigh heavily on the social and economic rights of the population. The rate of monetary poverty grew from 36.2 % in 2011 to 40.1 % in 2015.⁸ The weak and slow justice system and the impact of corruption in this sector in certain cases leads to arbitrary detentions, prolonged pre-trial detention and the denial of justice.

On 15 February 2013, Benin adopted a law setting up the Beninese Human Rights Commission. However, it is not yet operational.

During 2015, the EU held regular political dialogue with the government of Benin. Through the political dialogue under Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement, issues such as children's rights (with an emphasis on the need to implement the Child Code), women's rights (with a focus on improving their weak political representation), the recommendations of the Universal Periodic Review, and the establishment of the Beninese Human Rights Commission were raised.

In 2015, EU support to strengthen the rule of law in Benin resulted in the effective operationalisation of the national policy for the justice sector. EU support to new legislation resulted in the adoption of the Child Code and in a new Penal Code, still to be adopted. The continuity of EU assistance to the government programme for the improvement of living conditions in detention resulted in significant improvements, including for minors.

In addition, the EU finances access to basic services in the context of its support to the decentralisation of state social services. The EU also supported the strengthening of social promotion centres (SPCs) with a view to increasing the social coverage of the most vulnerable citizens and to providing services and advice to people suffering from human rights violations.

⁸ 2015 EMICoV (Integrated Modular Survey on Household Living Conditions).

In 2015, the EU and its Member States agreed on a joint roadmap to support civil society (2014-2017), which includes a strong component in support of CSOs to facilitate citizen participation, the promotion of human rights, and access to basic social services for Beninese citizens.

On child rights, in 2015 the EU focused on child trafficking, the protection of abused children, children in conflict with the law, combating ritual killings and the fight against sexual abuse at school. Efforts were made to strengthen the network of those involved in the protection and promotion of children's rights, including by providing support to centres dedicated to the protection and reintegration of minors. Training and capacity-building action was undertaken, and a network of trained judges was put in place. Action is being taken to improve hosting and rehabilitation services and respect for fundamental rights through the State Centre for Alternatives to the Detention of Minors.

Promoting the rights of disabled persons was another field of action. Here, the EU aimed to foster its participation in local governance and dialogue, improve standards of accessibility for disabled persons, and promote the educational integration of disabled children.

Public diplomacy initiatives focused on human rights and received good media coverage from the Beninese media sector. In particular, action was undertaken in relation to homophobia, child labour, political rights, violence against women, and ritual killings of children.

Botswana

The death penalty has been in force in Botswana since the country became independent in 1966. Since then, 47 convicted criminals have been executed. The last execution took place in 2013. The constitutionality of capital punishment was recently debated within the judiciary. However, the debate on this issue has not seemed to reach a broader audience.

Regarding rights of persons belonging to minorities, the fact that the government – after years of legal battles with the San/Barsawa indigenous community – seems to be again engaging in a dialogue with the San/Barsawa in the country is positive. However, it is difficult to assess the impact, as the results of this dialogue have not been made public. Despite the dialogue there is a continuing feeling of marginalisation in the San/Barsawa community.

On LGBTI rights no real progress has been made, and the 2014 High Court decision allowing LGBTI NGOs to register officially has yet to be implemented. The ongoing appeal by the government could delay progress by years. The Botswana Penal Code describes homosexual acts as offences against morality, punishable by up to seven years in prison. Less than two years before the next UPR process, there has been very little visible progress on the accepted recommendations, the establishment of a national human rights institution (NHRI) being amongst the most critical.

However, Botswana's continued strong stance on human rights issues and the ICC in international fora should be underlined. Since Botswana is a member of the Human Rights Council (HRC) and was re-elected for another two-year term in 2014, the required demarches in support of EU positions have been conducted by the EU Missions vis-à-vis the local authorities in the context of 28th, 29th and 30th HRC sessions; in addition to these, other human rights-related demarches were completed, e.g. on human rights defenders in the UNGA Third Committee and on ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. In contrast to many African countries, Botswana usually aligns with the EU position in its votes in the Human Rights Council and the UNGA Third Committee.

The growing tensions between the executive and the judiciary, as well as within the judiciary, are a cause for concern. High Court decisions are sometimes ignored when not pleasing to the executive. For example, two Ugandan refugees were extradited in November against an explicit High Court decision. Similarly, 10 Eritrean football players who had sought asylum in Botswana in October are facing extradition to a third country, again in defiance of a court order. In 2015, four High Court judges were suspended and impeached over allegations that they received a housing allowance while residing in government housing (case ongoing). These four judges (in particular Justice Key Dingake) have been known to make rulings in favour of human rights that are not necessarily agreeable to the executive, for example on women's right to inherit land and on the provision of anti-retroviral drugs to foreign prisoners.

Following an amendment to the Societies Act approved by cabinet in November, there is concern that the space for the already sparse civil society may be shrinking further. It will apply to all organisations and could be used selectively to make work impossible for civil society organisations critical of the government, including the numerous evangelical churches. The act also stipulates that at least 75 % of all members will have to be Botswanan, which may make work more difficult for the local offices of international NGOs.

In 2014, the responsibility for human rights matters in the country, excluding matters relating to refugees, was moved from the Ministry of Defence, Justice and Security to the Office of the President. Until the Office of the Ombudsman becomes a national human rights institution (NHRI), the human rights mandate resides with the Office of the President. Botswana is one of the few countries on the African continent that does not yet have an NHRI.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, Léo Heller, visited Botswana in November 2015 and urged the government to take the current extreme drought as an opportunity to develop a comprehensive strategy for providing access to safe drinking water and sanitation in the foreseen increasing water crisis. He underlined that the current drought situation raises serious human rights concerns over water quality, water quantity, and the related impact on health. Rural and minority communities could be hardest hit. The report with final findings and recommendations is expected in September 2016.

The EU as a whole also engages the Botswanan government on human rights as part of the Article 8 political dialogue under the Cotonou Agreement. During 2015, EU Missions continued their regular exchanges with some of the leading human rights organisations in the country, and also regularly held discussions with other key partners such as the US (on LGBTI issues) and the UN (UNICEF, UNAIDS).

Local human rights organisations require strengthening to perform their mandates and they benefit from the funding of the EIDHR. In 2015, EUR 0.6 million was awarded to four organisations. Specifically, three Gaborone-based projects were launched: Minority Rights Group International for work on the recognition of minorities and their rights; Botswana Network on Ethics, Law and HIV/AIDS (BONELA) for the promotion and protection of human rights in rural communities and the most at-risk populations (including a strong LGBTI component); and Stepping Stones International for work on child protection/sexual abuse. A fourth EIDHR project based in Maun was launched on 10 December during a celebration of Human Rights Day. This project, located in the most underprivileged district in Botswana, will be implemented by Ngamiland Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (NCONGO) and four local NGOs, and will provide human rights education to local stakeholders and communities in the region on a variety of human rights issues, including indigenous rights, the rights of people living with disability and children's rights. In addition, a capacity-building and mentoring programme for EIDHR grantees on monitoring and evaluation was also implemented during the year.

With regard to other human rights-related visibility events, the EU participated in the launch event of 16 days of activism to end violence against women on 25 November. The EU statement made at the event was shown by the country's only television broadcaster.

Burkina Faso

The agenda in Burkina Faso over the last year was largely dominated by political events (the transition and the military coup d'état in September 2015) and little progress was made on the EU's priorities for human rights in the country, such as the institutional framework for the protection of human rights, the death penalty, torture, detention conditions and the duration of trials, the justice system, freedom of expression, human rights defenders and civil society, women's rights, and children's rights.

The 2015 legislative and presidential elections can be considered a milestone following a difficult year of transition. The elections opened a new phase in the history of a country that had been ruled for the past 27 years by President Blaise Compaoré. The uprising in October 2014 that forced his departure and the subsequent transition was largely fuelled by a growing demand for justice and better living conditions. The new president elected in December 2015, Roch Marc Kaboré, and his government will need to respond to these demands in close coordination with international donors. The EU deployed an election observation mission (EOM), praised by various election stakeholders for its positive contribution.

During his speech at the swearing-in ceremony, President Kaboré made a clear indication that social justice, inclusion, good governance, the reinforcement of democracy and freedom would be at the centre of his efforts. The EU Delegation will play a major role in identifying the action to be taken to ensure these priorities are translated into concrete results. The EU is the main donor in the country and ensures coordination with the rest of the donor community by chairing regular donor meetings.

The transition government has already passed a law against corruption, reinforced the separation of powers (the President of Burkina Faso will no longer be the President of the National Council of the Judiciary) and introduced measures allowing for regular citizens to address the Constitutional Court directly. Another important element was the inclusion within the constitution of a body to control the state and to fight against corruption.

The EU's engagement on human rights and democracy in Burkina Faso is mainly channelled through its support to the National Policy on Justice (PAPNJ), which was launched in March 2014 and has a total budget of EUR 9.5 million. The main aim is to make justice more widely available and more protective of rights and freedoms.

The EU also focuses on child protection and three projects with three NGOs have been signed for a total amount of EUR 3.7 million. All are complementary and aim to prevent and reduce violence against children while setting up an integrated child protection system. A first evaluation of the project in 2015 was very positive, showing an innovative and holistic approach in setting up networks for the protection of children.

EU Member States are also active in the field of human rights in Burkina Faso. The EU enjoys important leverage and a good reputation in the country. This has traditionally translated into privileged access to the Burkinabe authorities. Such access is likely to continue with the newly elected authorities. Following a bilateral meeting with the Special Representative for the Sahel, Ángel Losada, at the swearing-in ceremony on 29 December 2015, it is likely that President Kaboré will continue to build on the privileged partnership between his country and the EU. The EU also enjoys good relations with civil society organisations, which were very active prior to and especially during the transition.

The complete renewal of the political scene in the country and the apparent willingness of the new authorities to engage in the field of human rights offer a good opportunity to tackle some of the important human rights questions with more determination than before the change in power.

Burundi

In 2015, the human rights situation in Burundi drastically deteriorated. Despite progress registered over the past ten years, the country has been facing a deep and prolonged political crisis since April 2015, linked to the decision of President Pierre Nkurunziza to stand for a third term.

In this context, the principal EU objective on human rights in Burundi in 2015 was to continue to work towards the increased protection of individual rights and fundamental freedoms through political dialogue and development cooperation instruments. To support this overarching goal, the EU concentrated its attention on promoting and protecting human rights defenders and civil society, combating discrimination, and contributing to the reform of the justice system. The EU also encouraged the authorities to investigate cases of extrajudicial execution and torture, and to eliminate impunity.

The EU and the Burundian authorities held an intensified political dialogue (as foreseen by Article 8 and Annex VII of the Cotonou Agreement) between October 2014 and May 2015, focusing on the political climate in Burundi, in particular as tensions increased in the run-up to the legislative and presidential elections in summer 2015. The issues covered included: human rights abuses; the lack of an independent justice system; political violence perpetrated by the *Imbonerakure*, the youth wing of the ruling party, 'National Council for the Defence of Democracy– Forces for the Defence of Democracy' (CNDD-FDD); restrictions on civil liberties and limitations to the freedom of expression and assembly; and the issuing of threats against dissidents, including those within the ruling party.

The Council adopted conclusions on the pre-electoral period in Burundi in March 2015, calling for conditions to be set up to enable free, inclusive and transparent elections and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. As the right conditions were not put in place, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) decided to withdraw the European Union's election observation mission to Burundi on 29 June 2015.

The Council subsequently adopted conclusions on Burundi in May, June and November 2015, reflecting growing concern over the deterioration of the situation and the increased human rights abuses.

Against this background and on the basis of the breaches of the essential elements of the Cotonou Agreement, including respect for democratic principles and the rule of law, on 26 October the EU invited Burundi to take part in the specific consultations provided for in Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement. The overall objective of this process is to encourage Burundi to commit to taking action within a specified time frame in the critical areas of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, on the basis of the principles set out in the Arusha Agreements, and to find a mutually agreeable solution. This process is also intended to support the efforts by the African Union, the United Nations and the East African Community to set up an inclusive mediated dialogue to solve the crisis.

Following the consultations held on 8 December, the EU has been working on a set of measures to be adopted by the Council, including measures on development cooperation, to encourage Burundi to commit to such a dialogue, to stop violence and protect human rights and ultimately to consolidate democracy and peace. The EU is likely to suspend direct development cooperation funding to the Government, but will take care to continue funding the protection of populations, including through humanitarian assistance.

On 1 October 2015, the EU Council, in line with the Council conclusions of June 2015, adopted sanctions against four individuals. The Council adopted travel restrictions and an asset freeze in respect of four persons whose activities were undermining democracy or obstructing efforts to achieve a political solution to the current crisis in Burundi, in particular through acts of violence, repression or incitement to violence, including acts which constitute serious human rights violations.

In terms of actions, the EU has pursued a permanent dialogue with human rights defenders throughout 2015. As a consequence of the deterioration of the situation, the delegation received 145 requests for the mobilisation of small grants to support human rights defenders (European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights); 32 of them have been selected as beneficiaries of EU support.

Through the mobilisation of EIDHR funds, the EU supported eight projects implemented by international NGOs in cooperation with national NGOs. EU cooperation, worth EUR 5.2 million, focuses on the following key areas: women's rights, the rights of the child and youth, and the rights of vulnerable groups. A package of additional measures will focus in 2016 on action to address violence against women and children and the protection of human rights defenders.

Finally, as a result of the active engagement of the EU, the Human Rights Council, at its 30th session in October 2015, adopted a resolution on the human rights situation in Burundi. This resolution places Burundi on the agenda of all regular Council sessions in 2016, ensures reporting from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in March and June, and calls for an interactive dialogue in the presence of various relevant stakeholders to take place in September 2016. A special session of the Human Rights Council on Burundi was held in December 2015, following attacks on military barracks and counter-attacks by security forces.

Cabo Verde

In 2015, the EU continued to engage in a regular dialogue on the consolidation of democracy and human rights in the context of the EU-Cabo Verde Special Partnership. The Partnership provides for reinforced political dialogue on democracy, human rights, the rule of law and good governance. The Special Partnership's action plan pays special attention to women's and children's rights, the situation of migrants, combating domestic violence, improving the judicial system, fighting corruption and promoting good governance.

Cabo Verde's overall human rights and fundamental freedoms record remains generally very positive. The country has stable political institutions, a well-functioning multiparty parliamentary democracy and an independent judiciary. The EU objectives, in the framework of its relations with Cabo Verde, are mainly to support the authorities' efforts to improve respect for human rights in the areas which still raise concerns, notably gender-based violence and discrimination against women, and the rights of the child, including child abuse and sexual violence against children.

The EU financed five projects to promote the rights and empowerment of women, to improve the economic situation of vulnerable groups, children and persons with disabilities, and to reinforce civil society in the country. The EU also supported the National Elections Commission in raising civic awareness on the 2016 elections (parliamentary, local and presidential) and reducing abstention rates, particularly among women and young voters.

The EU successfully carried out a demarche on the implementation of Article 4 of ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, on the establishment of a hazardous work list. The national parliament adopted the list unanimously in November 2015.

In relation to violence against women and discrimination, Cabo Verde is implementing two main plans in support of a new regulatory law over the next three years: the 'Third National Plan for Equality' and 'Plan II to Combat Gender-Based Violence (2015-2018)'.

Cameroon

In 2015, the EU's priorities in the area of human rights and democracy in Cameroon continued to be the fight against torture, the improvement of detention conditions, the protection of human rights defenders, the promotion of children's rights, in particular the fight against child trafficking, the elimination of violence against women, and non-discrimination.

The EU continued to engage actively on human rights and democracy in Cameroon through various channels, including through political dialogue under Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement. On 16 January 2015, the EU and Cameroon held a dialogue session devoted to governance and Cameroon presented the actions taken to implement its commitments, including in the area of human rights, democratisation, the rule of law and the fight against corruption. The discussion was an opportunity for the EU to invoke the need to ensure the full protection of human rights, including the right to a fair trial, as well as to call for further reforms of the electoral process, the judicial system and the mechanisms to fight corruption. The second annual session of the dialogue took place on 19 October 2015 and focused on security, regional issues, economic development and migration. Cameroon confirmed its commitment to fighting Boko Haram in line with international humanitarian and human rights law.

During 2015 the EU also reiterated its pleas for the abolition of the death penalty in Cameroon and for the ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The EU continued its dialogue with civil society and regular meetings were held with human rights defenders, including those involved in defending LGBTI rights. EU representatives attended trials of civil society members and political activists.

In 2015, the EIDHR focused on combating trafficking in human beings, preventing the sexual exploitation of children, ending the use of forced labour in the traditional societies (Lamidas) of northern Cameroon, and eliminating violence against women. Given the importance of consolidating democracy in the country, a new EIDHR call for proposals amounting to EUR 1.9 million was launched in February 2015, with the aim of strengthening political dialogue, supporting a participatory democracy and encouraging broad participation in elections. At the 104th International Labour Conference, the EU contributed to the examination of compliance of Cameroon with the ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour.

The EU also continued to provide financial support to CSO projects on the environment and the governance of natural resources. Some projects financed under the non-state actors instrument (NSA-LA) focused on the promotion of the rights of the local population and of vulnerable groups living in areas of mining exploitation, agro-industrial investments and/or infrastructure construction (including the right to compensation, protection against unlawful displacement, the obligation to consult the local population and the right to a safe environment).

Central African Republic

In 2015, the European Union pursued its efforts to improve the human rights situation in the Central African Republic (CAR), focusing on a regular dialogue with the transitional authorities and supported by a number of different EU instruments. The transitional authorities have expressed their deep concern over the human rights situation in the CAR. The final recommendations of the Bangui Forum (4-11 May 2015) stressed the importance of the fight against impunity, which remains crucial for the reconciliation process in the CAR. On 5 May in Bangui, leaders of 10 armed groups signed an agreement on the immediate and unconditional release of children from their respective armed groups. By the end of May, in Bambari, 300 children had been released by armed groups. Other release ceremonies brought the number of children liberated since May to 645.

Human rights-related activities undertaken by the EU and its Member States in the CAR were strongly influenced by the worsening security situation both in the capital and throughout the country, as well as by the issue of refugees (estimated to be around 450 000 in number) and internally displaced persons (estimated to be around 430 000 in number), including in Bangui. The UN published its first public human rights report in December 2015, covering the period of September 2014 to May 2015. During this period, it found that while the scale and severity of the conflict had declined, serious violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law continued to be committed throughout the country by non-state armed groups, including anti-balaka and ex-Seleka, and to a lesser extent by the state. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are the most affected by such violence.

Against a backdrop of uncertainty on the political and security fronts, which persisted throughout the CAR transition period in 2014-2015, the EU and its Member States remain a main partner for the authorities.

The EIDHR thematic line has a portfolio of three projects for a total of EUR 1.2 million. It supports the Central African authorities in their efforts to fight impunity and to strengthen capacity building among members of the judiciary.

The EU also provides EUR 20.9 million of support to a UNICEF initiative in the education sector in the CAR. The project aims to strengthen basic education services, and provide temporary care for up to 1 000 children released from armed groups and local militias.

The EU supports the CAR in its fight against impunity and its efforts to reconstruct the judiciary and the criminal justice system. Through the RESEJEP project (rehabilitation of the justice and police sectors), the EU gives significant financial support (EUR 15 million) to the Ministry of Justice. This has funded, among other things, the rehabilitation of Ngaragba and Bimbo prisons in Bangui.

Under the IcSP, a EUR 1 million project to support the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights started in May 2015, with a focus on preventing human rights violations and building capacities for local human rights NGOs.

Chad

In 2015, the EU's main objectives in the promotion of human rights in Chad remained reform of the justice system, reform of the security forces, the promotion of children's and women's rights, the promotion of democracy, the fight against the death penalty and the empowerment of civil society.. EU action took various forms, from political dialogue to technical cooperation, notably through the EDF, the IcSP and the EIDHR.

A session of political dialogue in the framework of Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement was held in January 2015 and constituted an occasion for the EU to raise concerns on several human rights issues such as justice reform, detention conditions and former Chadian president Hissène Habré's trial. The EU was also very engaged on individual cases throughout the year.

A project, implemented by a Chadian human rights organisation and funded by the EIDHR, was begun in November 2014 with the aim of supporting the Chadian lawyers working on the Hissène Habré trial. The EU Delegation closely followed the trial, which started in December 2014 and led to the conviction of 20 Habré-era security agents on charges of murder, torture, kidnapping and arbitrary detention. The court also sentenced seven men to life in prison, including Saleh Younous, former head of the Directorate of Documentation and Security (DDS), and Mahamat Djibrine, described as one of the 'most feared torturers in Chad' by the 1992 Chadian Truth Commission. Sensitisation sessions in relation to the Habré trial were carried out in Chad with financing from the IcSP.

As regards the Police Reform Project, there are two ongoing contracts with NGOs to improve relations between the security forces and the population through the provision of training to the security forces, communication, and the creation of local fora allowing the security forces, civil society and local authorities to discuss security matters. The Police Reform Project will also train the security forces on ethics. A study was also conducted as part of this project to assess the conditions for the creation of an observatory on the ethics of the domestic security forces and crime. The study showed that all parties were interested in the creation of such a structure.

In 2015, in the framework of the EIDHR, three projects were selected to protect and promote children and women's rights for a total amount of EUR 1 million. A 36-month long project with ACORD aims to reduce child marriage in central Chad. A 24-month project implemented by a local organisation, *Union des femmes pour la Paix* (Union of Women for Peace), aims to provide legal counselling for women in the southern town of Moundou. The third project, implemented by *Avocats Sans Frontières France* (Lawyers Without Borders France), aims to provide legal counselling for children and women detained in the cities of N'Djamena, Abéché and Koumra.

The French Embassy also continued to support NGOs active in the defence of women's and children's rights through a specific instrument, the *Fonds social de développement* (Social Development Fund). In 2015, six local NGOs were selected: CONA-CIAF (fight against FGM), LTDH (fight against early marriage), AECPEM and MUDESOF (violence in schools), CAASFFA (protection of migrant girls), and AFJT (women's leadership).

Through the Good Governance Support Project, the EU is promoting an increase in birth registration in Chad. Three projects are being implemented by UNICEF, ACORD and RAPS Mandoul in three pilot regions to increase people's awareness and train civil servants on child registration.

The EU Delegation has been closely following preparations for the elections that will be held in 2016 and 2017. A project worth EUR 475 000 over a three-year period has been granted to the Chadian Human Rights League (LTDH) for sensitisation campaigns and national observer training. The French Embassy also financed a six-month project (launched in October 2015) promoting youth electoral participation.

Concerning justice reform, the Support to Justice Reform Programme ended in 2014 and the European Union started to work with the Ministry of Justice and other main stakeholders on a new programme. A project by *Avocats Sans Frontières Belgique* (Lawyers Without Borders Belgium) to improve the Chadian people's knowledge of judicial procedures and help them protect their rights is still ongoing.

Finally, the EU continued to work closely with local human rights organisations and hosted several meetings with civil society.

Union of the Comoros

The EU objectives for human rights and democracy in the framework of its relations with the Union of the Comoros are to promote respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law, with a particular focus on electoral processes, justice and the fight against corruption, and women's and children's rights.

The EU continued to engage in human rights and democracy discussions with Comoros in various formats, including through frequent high-level missions, regular policy dialogue and development cooperation. Furthermore, in its intensified political dialogue with the Comorian authorities in the context of ongoing electoral support, the EU repeatedly reiterated its pleas for free, transparent and credible electoral processes, on the basis of the recently revised legal framework and structured stakeholders' consultations. A greater gender balance within electoral institutions and in political participation was also promoted through both legal reform and widespread awareness-raising campaigns.

With the renewing of the Union's and Islands' legislative and executive powers and the first ever municipal council elections, the 2014-2016 electoral cycle could either confirm the country's progress towards democracy, national integration and development or increase the risk of turning it back to chronic instability, separatism and poverty.

Other significant human rights-related developments on which the EU took a position in 2015 mainly concerned the judicial system. In accordance with new National Development Strategy priorities for 2015-2019, the EU is currently supporting the development of a justice sector reform to improve independence, integrity, efficiency, equity and access. Substantial EU support for the implementation of the reform is provided for under the 11th EDF.

The EU stepped up its dialogue with civil society organisations by adopting a joint EU-France road map for EU engagement with civil society for 2014-2017, which is financially supported via NSA-LA and EIDHR budget lines. Five NSA-LA projects are ongoing and additional calls for proposals under the NSA-LA programme and the EIDHR are planned for 2016-2017. France plans to enhance its support for human rights in Comoros in 2016 through new funds.

Republic of the Congo

In 2015, the EU's priorities in the area of human rights and democracy were the fight against torture, the improvement of detention conditions, the sound administration of justice and the promotion and protection of vulnerable people's rights.

In the context of a referendum to amend the constitution on 25 October, fundamental human rights such as freedom of assembly and freedom of expression were severely limited. Opposition parties were prohibited from organising political rallies after 20 October. Some of the demonstrations that took place nonetheless turned violent, with security forces reacting with excessive force. Several people were killed and many wounded. Two opposition leaders were kept under house arrest for over a week. Radio and television programmes were entirely dedicated to the ruling party and its campaign. Broadcasting by the international radio station RFI, as well as mobile internet and text messaging, were interrupted from 20 October until early November. An independent radio station had its equipment seized and its premises destroyed, with the owner receiving death threats. Other journalists reported having been put under pressure not to publish facts about the unrest developing in Brazzaville and Pointe Noire.

The political dialogue under Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement on 20 February included the issue of human rights. The EU stressed the need for the Republic of the Congo to effectively implement its obligations under international treaties, including the prohibition of torture, and to allow for access to detainees as a general rule. Exchanges also took place on a suitable approach to implement the UPR recommendations accepted by the Republic of Congo (164 out of 171) in October 2013. Despite this discussion, overall only very limited progress was possible in the dialogue with the Republic of the Congo on human rights and democracy. Fundamental human rights violations of detainees, indigenous people, children and women are currently being observed. Pleas for investigation and prosecution in alleged cases of abuse and torture by Congolese security forces and for human rights NGOs to be allowed to monitor and visit detention centres were not answered by the authorities. The legal codes and new legislation adopted by the Republic of the Congo are becoming increasingly inconsistent with international treaties.

The EU maintained its dialogue with Congolese civil society organisations via numerous formal and informal channels to share views and discuss key human rights concerns. The EU's annual meeting with human rights defenders took place on 17 August. EU involvement in support of respect for human rights and the protection of human rights defenders were highly appreciated. Special concern was expressed regarding the human rights conditions of migrants in the context of an operation to expel them from Congo. Furthermore, implementing the law on indigenous people's rights and an action plan were seen as a priority.

The European Union provides support to strengthen human rights in Congo via the EIDHR. Following the publication of a call for proposals in mid-2015 (budget of EUR 700 000), three projects were selected in the areas of the fight against arbitrary detentions and torture, and the protection and promotion of the rights of children and their families at risk. A second call for proposals under the EIDHR is planned for the first part of 2016. Further human rights projects focusing on women's and children's rights are also financed through a call for proposals targeting civil society organisations and local authorities.

In addition, the EU supports the strengthening of the rule of law in Congo via its PAREDA project. Currently in its second phase, with a budget of EUR 920 000 from the EDF, it assists the Ministry of Justice in a far-reaching and long-awaited revision of the national legal codes. In addition PAREDA provides support for the ratification and integration of key human rights treaties in the Congolese legal system, with a view to enhancing legal predictability, strengthening the role of the courts and ensuring adequate access to justice for all. The launch of the national commission tasked with updating the national codes in September 2015, followed by the presentation of the codes revised by the PAREDA international experts in November, represented landmark moments in the process of modernising the legal system of the Republic of the Congo.

Côte d'Ivoire

The EU human rights priorities in Côte d'Ivoire remain the right to security, justice and the rule of law; the fight against impunity and reconciliation; support to democracy; the protection of human rights defenders; and children's and women's rights, in particular measures to fight sexual violence against women and child labour.

Côte d'Ivoire made an important step in 2015 with the holding of calm and peaceful presidential elections and an electoral process that complied with international standards for democratic elections according to observers. The EU had deployed an election expert mission to analyse the overall process, including the updating of the voter list.

Although the general human rights situation has improved significantly compared to the previous decade and particularly following the 2010 post-election crisis, there are still a number of serious deficiencies in this area. The country remains framed by an ethno-geographic political split and further progress on reconciliation after the 2010 political crisis is still needed.

After his re-election in October 2015, President Ouattara announced that he remained committed to the priorities of reconciliation, social cohesion and impartial justice and a lot was achieved in these areas during 2015. On political dialogue and on reconciliation, the National Commission for Victims' Reconciliation and Compensation (CONARIV) was set up in 2015 to compensate the victims of the 2010 post-electoral crisis. There was also progress in the justice system with the abolition of the death penalty in March 2015 and the transposition of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) into domestic law. In response to an ICC arrest warrant, President Ouattara refused to transfer Simone Gbagbo to the Hague, considering that she should be tried in Côte d'Ivoire. The first national prosecutions took place against Simone Gbagbo and her supporters. The National Commission of Enquiry made progress in continuing investigations in both camps. However, progress in the justice sector is rather slow in terms of reparation to victims, judicial independence, access to the judicial system, and addressing impunity. There are also concerns regarding the conditions of arbitrary and/or prolonged arrest and those of detention.

The disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process was concluded in 2015. However, there is still a need for improvement in security reform, in particular in the west and centre of the country and in Abidjan, and also in the context of the progressive withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping mission in the country, ONUCI.

During the year, the government adopted policies to address child labour and human trafficking. Nevertheless, despite some progress, social protection for individuals is still low and access to basic services remains a major challenge for many Ivorian citizens. There are still serious concerns over gender inequality and sexual violence in the country. Sensitive issues surrounding land ownership, nationality and migration/immigration also constitute important challenges to stability in some parts of the country.

Through its permanent political contacts and its Article 8 political dialogue (under the Cotonou Agreement), the EU regularly raised human rights issues with the Ivorian authorities. The latest Article 8 political dialogue was held between EU Ambassadors and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, accompanied by many Ministers or Ministries (Interior, Justice and Human Rights, and Economy), in June 2015. The EU continues its permanent dialogue with political parties of all affiliations, as well as with local human rights CSOs and NGOs.

Specific dialogue meetings and EU development assistance have focused on security sector reform and the reinforcement of and access to justice which were financed through the 10th EDF and also to the reintegration of ex-combattants which was funded through the Instrument for Stability. Through the EIDHR, the EU provided support to NGOs working on conflict prevention in the western region and in sensitive urban areas. Through this instrument, the EU also financed civil society efforts to fight impunity and promote impartial justice, as well as initiatives on transitional justice. The EIDHR also funded projects to assist female victims of sexual violence and to strengthen civil society's capacities to facilitate reconciliation in the country. Through the 10th EDF, support continued to be provided to civil society on a project to promote local governance.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

The human rights situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is increasingly worrying, especially in the Eastern part of the country. The failure to hold local and provincial elections, and delays in scheduling legislative and presidential elections have generated serious growing tensions and concerns for both the freedom and security of civil society and political opposition.

In the Eastern DRC, many armed groups have remained active, and despite some limited successes, the army (FARDC) and UN peacekeepers (MONUSCO) have not gained the expected momentum, particularly because of limited operational cooperation. Armed groups' commanders have been responsible for numerous war crimes and grave abuses against the civilian population, in particular kidnappings and sexual violence. The FARDC have also been perpetrating human rights abuses and applying disproportionate force. Armed groups, as well as the FARDC continue to be linked to the illegal exploitation of natural resources.

The presence of refugees from several neighbouring countries – most recently from Burundi – and a large number of IDPs in the Eastern provinces, in addition to capacity constraints and insecurity, have contributed to a complex and unpredictable humanitarian situation.

In September, several political party leaders from the ruling coalition, the so-called G7, were expelled from the government for citing their opposition to the president's attempts to prolong his rule to a third term. Subsequently, the EU received reports of harassment of members of the opposition and their families. Physical threats against journalists, interruption of certain radio/TV transmissions, radio signal interference targeting RFI, and the suppression over a prolonged period of mobile internet access and SMS services have also taken place since then. In October, the EU issued a declaration which noted with concern the data published by the DRC's UN Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) which shows a significant increase in human rights abuses recorded, especially in Kinshasa and Goma, including loss of human life, injuries, arrests and lootings. Cases of arbitrary detention by intelligence services have also recently increased.

The EU has repeatedly called for a peaceful political climate, a calm debate, protection of freedom of expression, respect for human rights, the rule of law, and the rights of the opposition, respect for the Constitution of DRC, and an open political space, and guarantees of the independence and impartiality of the judiciary. The EU has also been actively engaged in supporting specific activities implemented by local non-state actors, and funded through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). Some examples of actions implemented in 2015 include: supporting women's organisations in the Kivus; funding initiatives to promote human rights-based civic education in view of the upcoming elections; financing several conflict-prevention activities at community level; promoting access to justice for women and children who are victims of sexual violence; and granting assistance to survivors of torture and other abuses. On 2 October 2015 the UN Human Rights Council adopted by consensus a resolution on the situation in the DRC.

Some positive steps were noted in the country. For instance, in September, the DRC ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol.

Important events that took place in 2015, such as a general conference on the state of justice, the inauguration of the Committee on Human Rights and the establishment of the Constitutional Court, should also be reported.

The EU continues to work through its cooperation programmes to improve the legal framework for elections and to promote electoral education. The EU also supports initiatives to encourage the enhancement of civil society, to foster civic education and to support the victims of human rights violations and investigations into cases of sexual violence. In the context of its comprehensive approach, the EU did not hesitate to voice concerns, through statements, speeches, workshops, and formal and informal steps, encouraging the DRC government to ensure full respect for human rights throughout the country.

Djibouti

Overall, there was no improvement in the human rights situation in Djibouti in 2015 and acts of harassment against human rights activists and government opponents continued, in particular during the period before the last presidential election. While the signature of a framework agreement between the government and the opposition on political reforms in December 2014 had given some leeway to the latter to hold public meetings and to have access to state media, this ended as negotiations got stuck on the issue of an independent electoral commission. The decision taken by the government at the end of November 2015 to declare “exceptional security measures” just months before the presidential election scheduled for April 2016 will not help to improve the human rights situation. On 21 December 2015, violent confrontations between security forces and opposition members took place in the country, which also affected civil society members and resulted in several fatal casualties. Excessive use of violence by the police and other security forces and the widespread impunity of abusers and torturers remain a major cause of concern.

At the beginning of 2015, the EU as well as France issued public statements welcoming the December 2014 framework agreement on political reforms as a positive step, and pointed to the importance of its full implementation. The EU reiterated this message at the Article 8 political dialogue meeting with the government in February 2015. The EU also continued to hold regular meetings with the opposition parties and human rights defenders during the year. Given the deterioration of the political situation in Djibouti at the end of 2015, marked by the violent confrontation between the government and the opposition, the EU issued a public statement demanding clarification on the events and that the perpetrators of abuses be brought to justice, and encouraged the government and the opposition to implement the 2014 framework agreement.

The EU Delegation manages several CSO projects in Djibouti, in particular on women's rights, rural resilience and the rights of persons with disabilities. Given that the reinforcement of civil society is a major priority for the EU in Djibouti, the EU has begun a process to establish a more structured dialogue with CSOs in the country. Three EU projects on resilience with a strong civil society component were launched in 2015, as well as two projects on women's rights and a project on the economic integration of persons with disabilities, with a total budget of EUR 1.8 million.

In addition, the 11th EDF National Indicative Programme for Djibouti has earmarked EUR 8 million for civil society, decentralisation and gender equality.

Human rights-related diplomatic outreaches also took place in 2015. In April, a demarche in support of the ratification of the Arms Trade Treaty was delivered to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and in October 2015 a demarche was delivered to the same minister in support of EU priorities and initiatives at the UNGA Third Committee.

Equatorial Guinea

The overall human rights situation in Equatorial Guinea continues to be of concern for the EU as no real progress was observed this year despite some tentatively encouraging signs in 2014. The main EU priorities in Equatorial Guinea as regards human rights therefore remain the same: transposing the moratorium on the death penalty to the national law, the improvement of freedom of expression and association, effective political pluralism and support for civil society. The situation of detention in 2015 remained challenging despite some improvements.

In 2015 the democratisation process in Equatorial Guinea did not experience any major progress. The implementation of measures that came out of the round table (November 2014) between the government and the opposition parties – which the EU encouraged – advanced very little. Two political parties were however legalised: the *Unión de Centro Derecha* (Union of the Centre Right, UCD) and *Ciudadanos por la Innovación en Guinea Ecuatorial* (Citizens for Innovation, CI), bringing the number of legalised political parties in the country to 15. In addition, no major reform of the electoral legislation was carried out, and representatives of the opposition, united under the platform *Frente de Oposición Democrática* (Democratic Opposition Front, FOD, created in March 2015), continue to be harassed and intimidated. The EU will seize every opportunity to call for a meaningful dialogue with all opposition parties in the run-up to the presidential elections expected in 2016.

The implementation of recommendations accepted by the authorities of Equatorial Guinea as part of the second review of the UN Universal Periodic Review in 2014 did not progress in 2015. The EU and its Member States supported civil society in preparing for this process and continue to closely monitor the implementation of the recommendations despite the lack of progress on this matter.

As regards the death penalty, no executions took place in 2015 following the adoption of a moratorium in 2014.

Despite difficulties, the EU and its Member States continued to engage with the Equatorial Guinean authorities as much as possible on human rights and democracy discussions in various formats, including on individual cases of people held in arbitrary detention. A number of European Parliamentary questions were raised on the persecution of opponents, arbitrary detention and freedom of expression, as well as on individual cases.

On a positive note, the country is benefiting for the first time from the EIDHR. A call for proposals was launched in 2015 with an allocation of EUR 300 000 to support civil society and human rights defenders. Consequently, a contract was concluded with an Equatorial Guinean NGO in December 2015 on a project called "*Incidencia de la sociedad civil en su fortalecimiento y en la promoción de los derechos humanos en Guinea Ecuatorial.*"

Eritrea

The Human Rights situation in Eritrea in 2015 remains a matter of serious concern. The internal political space for independent political parties, trade unions and media and active civil society engagement is extremely limited. The government continues to deny access to the country to the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea and to the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea.

In June 2015, the Commission of Inquiry published its first report, which found that systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed in Eritrea under the authority of the Government. Following this report, the Human Rights Council mandated the Commission of Inquiry to further investigate, including where violations may amount to crimes against humanity. The result of this investigation will be presented in June 2016.

The government has shown some willingness to increase its engagement with the international community on human rights, trafficking and smuggling-related issues. In particular, the government has expressed its readiness to make progress on some recommendations made in the Universal Periodic Review process and is actively involved in the Khartoum Process on migration, where it is a member of the Steering Committee. A human rights component, related to the implementation of the UPR recommendations (those which have been accepted by the government) is included in the EU's 11th EDF National Indicative Programme (2014-2020). The project to implement these measures is under preparation. In 2015, the government declared its intention to reduce the currently unlimited national service for Eritrean citizens to 18 months, though this was later retracted. In 2015, the EU continued to remind Eritrea of its human rights obligations under both international and domestic law. In the framework of the political dialogue, as well as in both formal and informal exchanges with the authorities, the EU urged the Eritrean government to take concrete steps to improve the human rights situation.

In April 2015, an Article 8 political dialogue meeting on migration was held, focusing on root causes, human trafficking and smuggling, as well as regional and international cooperation. In November 2015, another dialogue was dedicated to human rights and migration. In this framework, the EU expressed appreciation for the involvement of the country in the UPR process and firmly committed to working with Eritrea on key human rights aspects. At the same time the EU expressed concern about the general human rights situation, and underlined the need to show concrete progress on and commitment to human rights.

In 2015, the EU also continued to voice concerns with the authorities about the problem of migration and human trafficking in the Horn of Africa. The EU Delegation in particular was very involved in the preparations for Eritrea's participation in the Valletta Summit, as well as continuing to support the Eritrean government's concrete involvement in the Khartoum Process.

Human rights-related diplomatic outreach also took place during the year. In March 2015, a demarche to promote the establishment of up-to-date hazardous work lists in line with ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour was delivered to the Minister for Labour and Human Welfare. In October and November 2015, a number of demarches were delivered to the government in support of EU priorities and initiatives at the UN General Assembly Third Committee.

In terms of specific financial support to human rights, there are currently eight ongoing projects under the EIDHR programme and 12 under the CSO-LA programme on different issues such as labour rights, women's and children's rights, and the rights of persons with disabilities.

Ethiopia

Freedom of expression and of association remained problematic in Ethiopia in 2015, as voices critical of the government, including members of the opposition and journalists, continued to be arrested throughout the year, notably under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation (ATP). The number of terrorism cases brought to court is on the rise, with over 40 ongoing cases and 280 people accused. The EU Delegation followed the situation closely and monitored some of the trials. Moreover, the EU and its Member States have discussed civil and political rights through the Article 8 political dialogue with the government, including at the highest political level.

In March 2015, seven land rights activists were arrested on their way to an international NGO meeting on food sovereignty and land rights, and three of them were subsequently charged under the ATP. Clashes with the police at the official anti-Islamic State rallies of 22 April following the killings of Ethiopian Christians in Libya also led to dozens of arrests. At least nine active party members were arrested, with subsequent sentences ranging from two months to three and a half years of imprisonment.

In July 2015, a few days before the visit of US president Barack Obama, the Ministry of Justice dropped terrorism charges against five bloggers and journalists of the Zone 9 blogging community and released Reyot Alemu, a journalist sentenced to five years imprisonment on similar charges, just shortly before her release date.. Acquittal of four other members of the Zone 9 group followed in October. However, following the prosecution's appeal the case can still be reviewed by the Supreme Court, and one Zone 9 member still faces charges under the Criminal Code.

At another emblematic trial, 18 members of the Muslim Arbitration Committee received lengthy prison sentences ranging from seven to 22 years for their role in the Muslim protests. Some were released in September as part of the annual New Year pardons.

General elections took place in Ethiopia on 24 May 2015 within a highly controlled pre-electoral environment and narrow political space. The EU was not invited to observe the elections; the HR/VP spokesperson issued a statement on the elections on 27 May referring to the limited space for an open debate and the negative impact this had on the overall electoral environment. The only international election observation mission was sent by the AU, and concluded that the elections were 'calm, peaceful and credible'. However, the AU mission highlighted flaws related to transparency; moreover, over 100 opposition observers were temporarily detained on election day. The ruling party and its allies eventually claimed all seats in parliament with 82% of the vote. After the elections, targeted arrests of political opposition members continued, with opposition claims that seven of their active members were killed for political motives.

The government of Ethiopia is currently drafting a new National Human Rights Action Plan (NHRAP) for 2016-2018, and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) continued to observe the national human rights situation. With support from several donors, the EHRC carried out observation of the human rights aspects of the elections but so far no report has been released. The appointment of a new chief commissioner, the former deputy chairman of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia, casts doubts about the EHRC's capacity for independent oversight of the executive. Ethiopia introduced a new human trafficking law in August 2015. From a human rights perspective, its downsides are the introduction of the death penalty and of the possibility of moving the burden of proof to the accused.

A number of conflicts and violent clashes in 2015 also raised human rights concerns. In the Gondar region, ethnic tensions between the Amhara and Quemant communities allegedly led to several hundreds of deaths in November and December. A prison fire and subsequent unrest officially claimed the lives of at least 17 prisoners and residents, though several sources point to a higher number of casualties. Widespread student and farmers' protests in over 150 towns in Oromia – notably linked to the Addis Ababa master plan – were revived again in December, leading to widespread unrest and the killing of at least 100 people. The availability of accurate information remains an important challenge given the scarcity of independent sources and the lack of access to areas of conflict. The HR/VP spokesperson issued a statement on the clashes on 23 December.

HR/VP Mogherini visited Addis Ababa on 20 October 2015, where she met Ethiopian leaders, including the prime minister, as well as civil society representatives. Civil society space in Ethiopia is very restricted and she discussed human rights concerns in the country and ways in which the EU could assist.

Gabon

The EU objectives for human rights and democracy in Gabon are to address the conditions of detention, 'ritual' crimes, women's rights, and trafficking in human beings, including children. Ahead of the presidential and legislative elections in 2016, the transparency and inclusivity of the electoral process also raised concerns. The implementation of electoral reforms, including a complete and integrated biometric system, has been widely demanded by civil society. The effectiveness of the judicial system is limited by insufficient financial and human resources (for instance in the area of forensic medicine) and by corruption. The right to justice and right to life were called into question, as demonstrated by the detention of former minister Serge Maurice Mabiala and the case of the young student Bruno Mboulou Mbeka, allegedly killed during the opposition protest of 20 December 2014. Following the events, the EU issued a local statement deploring violence and the death of the young student, and calling for restraint by all parties, an immediate investigation by the authorities, and an open and constructive political dialogue.

There was no specific annual human rights dialogue with all the authorities concerned but the EU and its Member States continued to engage in human rights and democracy discussions with Gabon in various formats and at different levels. A political dialogue under Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement was held with the Gabonese authorities in June 2015. The parties committed to holding the dialogue twice a year from 2016, with the next session scheduled for early 2016.

In 2015, the EU continued to collaborate with Gabon in the context of its membership of the UN Human Rights Council. The EU and its Member States conducted several ad hoc demarches and outreach activities with the Gabonese authorities. The EU further increased cooperation and the alignment of positions with Gabon, mainly in preparation for the United Nations General Assembly Third Committee meetings and on multilateral issues of common concern.

Concerning the ratification of international human rights instruments, in 2015 Gabon progressed with the submission and discussion of several reports, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The ratification process for the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance are currently being examined by the relevant authorities.

In 2015 Gabon launched interministerial consultations with a view to preparing for the third UPR, which is expected to take place in late 2016 or early 2017.

The EU Delegation maintained its regular dialogue with civil society and human rights organisations, and met the representatives of relevant official bodies, namely the Directorate General for Human Rights and the National Human Rights Commission. In 2015, the EU and its Member States drew up a roadmap for their engagement with civil society in Gabon.

As regards financial cooperation, the country benefits from the EIDHR. A call for proposals was launched in 2015 under the Country-Based Support Scheme, and contracted with an allocation of EUR 600 000.

The Gambia

The situation in The Gambia in the area of human rights and the rule of law is still a serious concern to the EU. In 2015, the EU's priorities remained freedom of the media, the death penalty, violence against women, compliance with international human rights mechanisms, detention conditions, support for human rights defenders, non-discrimination, and the rule of law. In the context of a difficult political environment, the EU continued to implement these priorities together with Member States locally represented in or accredited to The Gambia. In June 2015, the Article 8 political dialogue was resumed, having been suspended by The Gambia since November 2014. Human rights issues were raised in the formal political dialogue and/or in diplomatic contacts with the Gambian authorities throughout the year.

In 2015, the EU expressed its concern at the existing legislation on freedom of expression, which opens the door to broad interpretations and potential abuse, and at the arrests and reports of harassment of journalists and human rights defenders. The EU Delegation in Banjul held regular press lunches, where representatives of the local media were invited for an informal exchange of views. Furthermore, the EU is to support the improvement of the media environment through a UNESCO project financed by the European Development Fund (EUR 870 000). The EU also continued to support civil society and human rights defenders in the country, including through support to local NGOs.

Some negative developments in 2015 include the introduction of higher financial and logistical thresholds for election candidates and political parties. This reinforces doubts about the existence of a level playing field ahead of the upcoming presidential and legislative elections in 2016 and 2017. In the area of religious freedom, which was satisfactory overall, President Jammeh's declaration of The Gambia as an Islamic Republic is cause for concern.

Concerning women's rights, notable progress was achieved with President Jammeh's announcement of a ban on feminine genital mutilation in November 2015, which was transformed into law in early 2016. Continuous lobbying by local associations and international actors, including the EU, had preceded this important step. Three EU-funded projects were launched to address women's rights and the economic empowerment of women (EUR 800 000).

The Gambia underwent its second UPR in November 2014, to which the EU had contributed. The UPR working group pointed out a number of serious shortcomings in the area of civil and political rights, in particular regarding freedom of expression and assembly, but acknowledged progress in the areas of women's rights, education and healthcare. In its reaction in March 2015, the government of The Gambia accepted most UPR recommendations concerning women's rights, including feminine genital mutilation, children's rights, the rights of persons with disabilities, health, education and training, refugees, the National Human Rights Commission, compliance with UN reporting duties, the improvement of the judiciary and its independence, social welfare, and development. All UPR recommendations concerning abolitions or restrictions on the death penalty or concerning the rights of LGBTI persons were rejected, however. Recommendations on freedom of expression were 'noted' or accepted 'subject to the laws of The Gambia'.

In a positive development, The Gambia acceded to the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol in June 2015. However, a number of important international conventions have not yet been ratified by The Gambia, notably those on torture and enforced disappearance.

In early 2015, the UN Special Rapporteurs on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment published their reports on their mission to The Gambia in November 2014. Both reports highlighted severe shortcomings and were rejected by the authorities of The Gambia. The mission had been partially suspended, because the special rapporteurs had not been allowed full access to the main prison, contrary to the previously agreed terms of reference. The EU regularly encouraged the Gambian government to renew the invitation to the special rapporteurs.

In July, a presidential pardon was granted to around 300 prisoners. Furthermore, Gambian officials visited Nigeria to study the Human Rights Commission in this country with a view to establishing such a commission in The Gambia. However, despite repeated announcements of progress and continuous lobbying by the EU, the relevant legislation has not been adopted yet.

In 2015, the president confirmed his anti-LGBTI position and both the law against 'unnatural behaviour' and the amendment on 'aggravated homosexuality' remain in place. The EU continued to express concern in the formal political dialogue and in diplomatic contacts.

In the wake of the failed coup attempt on 30 December 2014, the EU issued a local statement, condemning the attack and urging respect for the rule of law as regards detainees. Harassment and intimidation continue, including arbitrary arrests and unlawful detention exceeding the constitutional limit of 72 hours, mostly by the National Intelligence Agency (NIA). In the Article 8 dialogue, the EU expressed concerns regarding unlawful arrests and cases of detention beyond the constitutional limit. The independence of the judiciary remains questionable, due amongst other things to the frequent removal and appointment of judges. Long-term technical assistance for access to justice and legal education is currently ongoing (EUR 2 689 850), funded through the European Development Fund. Activities cover the fields of access to justice, legal education, research and training, and case management.

Ghana

According to Freedom House, Ghana's human rights situation is quite good, with a score of 37/40 for Political Rights and 47/60 for Civil Liberties. However, the death penalty remains part of Ghanaian law although no prisoner has been executed since 1993 (most death sentences are commuted to life imprisonment). Similarly, homosexuality remains illegal in Ghana although this law is rarely imposed.

At the Article 8 political dialogue between Ghana and the EU, held in June 2015 and co-chaired by the President of Ghana, John Dramani Mahama, a wide range of human rights issues were addressed. Both the EU and Ghana underlined a shared commitment to the democratic process and respect for human rights, stressing in particular the importance of inclusive, transparent and credible elections in November 2016 that will reconfirm Ghana's already-established democratic credentials. Both parties agreed on the important role played by the Electoral Commission in this process.

Corruption continues to be a growing concern. In a preparatory meeting with civil society organisations which the EU organised in May 2015 to identify relevant issues that should be included in the political dialogue, corruption was identified as one of the main concerns. The issue was raised at the dialogue, where the EU welcomed the adoption of the government's National Anti-Corruption Action Plan and announced future support for its implementation. In May 2015, the EU welcomed the adoption and publication of Ghana's Payroll Action Plan to address payroll irregularities; as a consequence, and based on the positive assessment of the conditions for payment, the EU's budget support to Ghana was resumed. However, much remains to be done to prosecute those responsible for corruption at all levels. Ghana's good rhetoric on this issue is not matched by strong action.

Access to an accountable, fair and efficient justice system was also one of the key human rights issues addressed during 2015. Particular public attention was given to a documentary showing corruption cases among judges, which was presented to the public in September in Accra. This scandal brought forth a national debate regarding the appointment process for judges and a more general discussion on the reform of the justice sector. An inquiry into this issue, as well as previous related corruption cases, is ongoing.

Gender mainstreaming was at the centre of many EU projects and discussions in Ghana this year. The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection finalised the Affirmative Action Bill, which will be submitted to cabinet for consideration. Once passed into law, it will hopefully contribute to redressing social, cultural, economic and educational imbalances and to fostering gender equality in Ghana. In the meantime, in 2015 the ministry launched a National Gender Policy to mainstream gender equality concerns into the national development processes. The policy focuses on improving the social, legal, civic, political, economic and socio-cultural conditions of the people of Ghana, particularly women, children, vulnerable people and people with special needs, such as persons with disabilities and the marginalised.

The EU has continued to promote human rights through its development cooperation. EUR 12 million was provided in support of independent government institutions involved in the electoral process (such as the Electoral Commission, the National Media Commission and the National Commission for Civic Education), empowerment initiatives for women and youth, and civil society organisations that promote civic and voter education.

The EIDHR, provided funds to implement a number of activities in partnership with civil society organisations for the promotion and protection of children's rights in the country. This is being done in close collaboration with UNICEF.

On 16 October 2015, a forum with civil society organisations and local authorities was organised to inform them about the EU CSO-LA thematic programme and to solicit their input for the drafting of guidelines for the launch of a call for proposals in 2016.

Guinea

As was the case in 2014, during 2015 Guinea faced human rights and rule of law challenges in a context of political tensions and long-overdue medical and economic recovery from Ebola. EU action in the field of human rights consisted of engaging with the authorities through regular dialogue and public diplomacy, as well as providing technical and financial assistance.

Alpha Condé (RPG), the first democratically elected president (December 2010) after a succession of authoritarian regimes and coups d'état, was re-elected in the first round of the presidential election on 11 October. An EU election observation mission was deployed from September to November 2015 to observe the process. Despite violent incidents before polling day, resulting in a reported 11 deaths, voting took place in relatively calm conditions and with a high turnout.

However, the presidential election was marred by logistical and organisational problems, as well as a lack of transparency by the Electoral Commission, insufficient administrative impartiality and unequal access by parties and candidates to the public media. Despite institutional weakness, a slow pace of reform and low state capacity to deliver basic services to the population, fewer street demonstrations took place in 2015 compared with the parliamentary elections in 2013. After violent clashes between opposition activists and security forces in April and May 2015 and the opposition's boycott of the April-July parliamentary sessions, the opposition and the ruling coalition resumed political dialogue in late June, reaching an agreement with the active support of the international community (including the EU).

As a sign that impunity is being tackled, since his re-election Alpha Condé has sacked one minister and several high officials for misconduct. In addition, the Superior Council of Magistrates (CSM) sanctioned five magistrates for misconduct in 2015.

The disproportionate use of force by security forces in restoring public order resulted in fewer casualties in 2015 compared with the 2013 electoral year, indicating an improvement in the tactics used by security forces. More than five years on, the domestic investigation continues into the September 2009 massacre of opposition supporters at a rally in Conakry, largely by members of the elite presidential guard. In 2015, Guinea's domestic panel of judges investigating the massacre made some progress by completing the interviews of victims and by charging more than a dozen people. The current Justice Minister also expressed his commitment to having proceedings move forward in 2016.

Despite this progress in fighting impunity, there is still a lack of accountability for serious abuses committed by security forces and other officials. Ambitious reforms of the justice sector and the security sector are being implemented with the support of the international community (including the EU). With the EU's technical assistance, several key legal texts (the Criminal Code, Code of Criminal Procedure, Code of Military Justice, Civil Code and Children's Code) are being revised according to international standards. Regarding the situation of prisons, the corrections sector reached a critical stage in 2015 with several prison escapes or attempted escapes, resulting in violent clashes between detainees and security forces. Unequal access to justice, impunity, prison overcrowding and lengthy justice procedures persist and as a result Guinean citizens lack confidence in their judicial system. However, a bill to streamline the organisation of jury courts and accelerate trial processes was passed in August 2015. A lack of resources and trained staff constitute challenges to the effective implementation of this reform. Through the EU-funded thematic programmes, various projects implemented by NGOs continued in the field of women's empowerment and women's and children's rights.

Violence against children and a very high prevalence rate of female genital mutilation (FGM) remain a matter of grave concern. Freedom of speech, provided for by the Guinean constitution, is generally observed, however. Regular clashes related to disputes between different branches of Islam have been reported and the authorities have placed the topic of the Islamist terrorist threat on their agenda. The government recently ordered the closure of a mosque on the ground of airport security concerns and a debate was opened over the ban on full-face veils, an issue that President Condé is eager to regulate on a regional basis through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The Provisional National Reconciliation Commission (PNRC) set up in 2011, which had not proved effective, tentatively resumed its work in 2015 without making any major advances.

Guinea undertook its second Universal Periodic Review in January 2015, accepting 179 recommendations and 'noting' 15 others. The Minister for Human Rights has not yet managed to integrate these recommendations into the National Policy for Human Rights, which still requires local, regional and national consultations to be held before it can be adopted.

In 2015 the EU continued to provide technical and financial support to Guinea in coordination with the United Nations and other international stakeholders. The EU's main activities in the area of human rights in 2015 focused on support for the organisation of the presidential elections, assistance to the reform of the justice sector (PARJU), and the fight against impunity and reform of the penitentiary system. The EU's support also includes assistance to the reform of the security sector, support to civil protection and forest guards (ninth EDF), funding for capacity-building and peace-building activities for civil society and the media, and support for the empowerment of women and other vulnerable groups.

Guinea-Bissau

In 2015, the human rights situation in Guinea-Bissau improved. However, there were reports of torture and other ill-treatment and deaths in police custody. The EU's main objectives for democracy and human rights in the country include supporting the authorities' efforts to consolidate democratic stability and the rule of law, fighting poverty and improving human rights in the country. Following the 2014 elections and the restoration of the constitutional order, in March 2015 the EU lifted its restrictions on its development cooperation with Guinea-Bissau. That same month the EU, together with the government of Guinea-Bissau and the UNDP, organised a donors' conference in Brussels in support of the National Development Strategy 2015-2025 and the five-year operational plan 'Terra Ranka', which includes a pillar on the consolidation of democracy, the rule of law and the promotion of human rights.

The political dialogue with Guinea-Bissau under Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement resumed in 2015, and a session with the then prime minister took place on 7 July in Bissau. Human rights, the rule of law and the fight against impunity were raised during this meeting and at all other regular bilateral contacts at both delegation and headquarters level.

Political events since August 2015 confirm that in Guinea-Bissau one of the major problems is still the rule of law.

In 2015, the EU continued to provide financial support to projects funded through the EDF and the EIDHR. These projects focused on reinforcing civil society's capacities as regards human rights, supporting the fight against gender-based violence and the promotion of women's empowerment, promoting the rights of the child, improving the conditions of detention and raising overall awareness on the subject of human rights through the organisation of different activities.

Kenya

Overall, in relation to the human rights situation in Kenya, in some areas, limited steps were taken in the right direction, while in others, the situation deteriorated. Insecurity and the rather hard-line government response to terrorism continue to be a serious concern. A number of disappearances or extrajudicial killings, illegal detentions, torture and other violations of human rights were reported by the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights. LGBTI rights are still under pressure as homosexuality is still criminalised by law even though no prosecutions are de facto conducted. Kenya has not abolished the death penalty and courts still issue death sentences.

As in previous years, the EU worked on a broad range of human rights issues in Kenya, in particular on supporting the implementation of the 2010 constitution, tackling impunity, preventing extrajudicial killings, and protecting human rights defenders.

The 2010 constitution created a system of decentralisation whereby the legislature and the executive are devolved to the 47 administrative counties. This process is supported by the EU. Some constitutional challenges remain, such as the implementation of the 'two-thirds gender rule'. The EU has given particular priority to supporting the implementation of the constitution by addressing the issue in its political dialogue and through public diplomacy. Many development cooperation projects in 2015 also focused on this issue and the EU recently selected four CSO projects to help enforce the two-thirds gender rule at local level in the run-up to the 2017 elections, with a view to preventing and reporting discrimination against women during party nominations.

President Kenyatta, his deputy William Ruto and their supporters strongly advocated against the ICC to dismiss the charges pending against Deputy President Ruto. Through private messages to the government and influential players, the EU underlined the importance of Kenya's continued cooperation with the ICC in accordance with the Rome Statute. Impunity remains an issue in Kenya as politicians, security forces and high-level officials are rarely held to account for their actions. The EU raised the issue of extrajudicial killings in its dialogue with the government.

Furthermore, many human rights defenders are often intimidated, harassed and placed under surveillance. Many are also vulnerable to criminalisation and defamation. The EU Delegation and EU Member States supported CSOs and human rights defenders advocating for an end to impunity, such as the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) and the Independent Medico-Legal Unit (IMLU). The Netherlands continues to serve as the EU focal point on this issue and chairs the monthly Human Rights Defenders Group which brings together Member States, international partners (the US, Canada, Norway, Switzerland) and CSOs active in the field.

The EU also maintains a regular dialogue with civil society on human rights issues.

Kenya underwent the UPR process in January 2015. Kenya supported most of the recommendations, including those relating to national human rights protection instruments, extrajudicial killings, gender, children's rights, and ensuring compliance with international law in the fight against terrorism. However, Kenya rejected recommendations related to the ratification of different international conventions, the abolition of the death penalty, criminal sanctions for media offences, the legalisation of abortion and the decriminalisation of same-sex relations.

As regards the fights against terrorism, it should be stressed that notwithstanding compliance with generally accepted norms for the safeguard of human rights, the rule of law must be applied in full against the extreme forms of radicalism and terror.

Lesotho

Incidents of human rights abuses increased in 2015. The state of instability after the alleged coup of August 2014 undermined the rule of law. Human rights violations include cases of torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, arbitrary killings, lengthy pre-trial detention, and long trial delays. There was also an increase in the number of death threats against lawyers, civil society stakeholders and other individuals, as well as some curtailment of freedom of expression and the civil society space. Violence against women and children remains a major concern in the country.

Despite this situation, Lesotho's governance, rule of law and human rights indicators remain relatively satisfactory by continental and regional standards.

Governance institutions such as the Office of the Ombudsman, the Directorate on Corruption and Economic Offences, and the Auditor General are operational. However, the civil service is weak and extremely politicised, management capacity is variable and corruption is common. Fighting corruption was a priority of the former prime minister but the current government seems to be less concerned by it. Several court cases are pending, including cases against ministers.

The long-overdue National Human Rights Commission has not yet been established. However, in 2015 a bill seeking to operationalise this commission was tabled in the National Assembly and a vote is expected to be held soon.

The judicial sector is relatively weak and marred by internal rivalry and the consistently slow handling of cases. Justice Majara was appointed Lesotho's Chief Justice in 2014. It is hoped that she will be in a position to implement the necessary reforms and encourage the judiciary to use the case management system for which the EU provided significant capacity-building support. The current President of the Court of Appeal, Justice Mosito, has come under fire from the current prime minister and rumours are circulating that he might be fired only to be replaced by a controversial individual.

Concerning the death penalty, there is a worrying trend emerging. Death sentences automatically go to the Court of Appeal where the judges, who traditionally came from South Africa, would commute the sentences to life imprisonment; however, this is now changing because the judges are no longer primarily from South Africa.

Lesotho's seven-party coalition government, formed after the February 2015 snap elections, faced critical challenges throughout the year, in particular in relation to the killing of former Commander of the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF) General Mahao. As a consequence, in July 2015 the Southern African Development Community (SADC) decided to establish a commission of inquiry (CoI) to investigate the circumstances surrounding the shooting of Commander Mahao, the alleged mutiny plot within the LDF, the alleged kidnapping of former members of the LDF, and the alleged killings of some opposition members. The work of the SADC CoI was hindered by unsatisfactory cooperation from army witnesses and by the government. The LDF's concurrent pursuit of a court martial and its disregard for High Court orders to release military detainees, who were supposed to testify at the CoI, also upset the work of the CoI. The opposition's party leaders have been in exile across the border in South Africa since May, citing personal security concerns, and opposition members of parliament are currently boycotting parliament.

EU support in the governance sector in 2015 focused on providing support to the following sectors: justice; social protection, in particular for vulnerable children; public financial management; civil society; and human rights. Through the EIDHR, the EU also financed initiatives on anti-trafficking and gender-based violence. The EU is also supporting a project on gender mainstreaming and justice to help authorities make progress on gender equality in the country. Through the EDF, the EU is also working with UNICEF to provide technical assistance to the Ministry of Social Development to promote the rights of vulnerable children.

Key challenges that need to be addressed in the governance sector include making governance institutions more effective guardians of their legal prerogatives, establishing an effectively functioning National Human Rights Commission, ensuring the efficient administration of justice, carrying out civil service reforms (and depoliticising the army), tackling discrimination against women, improving social protection systems, and setting up a legal framework for civil society to operate effectively and freely.

Liberia

The EU's human rights priorities for Liberia include the official abolition of the death penalty, the promotion and protection of women's and children's rights, and the provision of support to civil society in their efforts to promote human rights. Specific objectives include ensuring access to health and education for women and children, reducing all forms of exploitation, and addressing gender-based violence and maternal mortality. Issues of concern include prison conditions and the high number of pre-trial detainees, which reflects wider systemic weaknesses in the criminal justice system. Accountability and transparency concerns exist across the public sector.

The EU continued to engage actively on human rights in 2015, including through the formal EU-Liberia political dialogue. The EU also sought to inform public debate on issues such as the death penalty and gender-based violence, including through the media. Practical support to address human rights concerns was offered by both the EU and its Member States, with specific projects in the areas of women's rights, children's rights and the justice sector. In May 2015, Liberia underwent its second Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations Human Rights Council. It was commended for its efforts in tackling Ebola and for the progress on the peaceful political transition in recent years.

The government of Liberia has acknowledged many of these issues and is taking steps to address them, although it has also highlighted a need to respect domestic opinion on subjects such as LGBTI rights and the death penalty. In many areas a lack of resources and capacity constraints hamper efforts to comply with international obligations, including with regard to economic and social rights.

With the Ebola outbreak in Liberia largely under control by early 2015 there was no repeat of the state of emergency declared in August 2014. The holding of senatorial elections in December 2014 was a positive indication of the commitment to democracy and due process despite the challenging circumstances in which they were held, while the reopening of schools in February 2015 marked the end of large-scale restrictions which had had a direct impact on human rights.

Nevertheless, the Ebola outbreak underlined the government of Liberia's limitations in providing for the basic needs of its citizens and exposed the continued lack of trust between the general population and the ruling elite. This lack of trust is linked to poor transparency and accountability, including widespread corruption at all levels of public service, as well as among more senior levels of the executive, legislature and judiciary.

With EU funds, several projects via the EIDHR are currently being implemented in Liberia on access to justice for women and girls, gender-based violence and harmful traditional practices, including FGM. A community-based initiative for the promotion of human rights and gender equality in rural areas of Liberia is being implemented by the Liberian National Red Cross Society through the Danish Red Cross, and works to strengthen the Red Cross's capacity to work on gender equality, as well as to combat gender discrimination and vulnerability in rural communities in Lofa, Bong and Nimba counties. The project had been suspended until May 2015 due to the Ebola epidemic.

New projects were selected in 2015 to start activities in 2016, including projects on the rule of law and good governance through increased transparency and access to information in the security and justice sectors.

Through the initiative AWARE: A West African Response to Ebola, the EU has prioritised support to the education sector in Liberia. One of the EU's key objectives is to ensure access to clean water in schools in Liberia and mobilise communities in order to maintain and properly use the facilities provided. A project organized by Save the Children and funded via the European Instrument for Stability (IfS) supported the participation of children and youth, as well as vocational training.

Madagascar

The main human rights priorities for Madagascar in 2015 were the promotion of fundamental freedoms, the promotion of women's and children's rights and the elimination of violence, respect for human rights in public administration and justice, and support to civil society and to human rights defenders.

Two Article 8 dialogues were held at presidential level during 2015 on the malfunctioning of the justice system in general and in particular the effective fight against corruption and rosewood traffic, the existing difficulties for freedom of expression and the new Communication Code to be voted on in July 2016. Other issues discussed included the human rights abuses and illegal executions in the south of the country committed by security forces during the repression against armed bandits (*Dahalo*), the supervision of local communities opposing the impunity of these bandits, and civil society's lack of participation in the definition and implementation of public sector policies.

The 2015 municipal elections were transparent and peaceful with a reasonable turnout (50 %), and were won by the president's party. In line with the ongoing stabilisation efforts, senatorial elections took place on 29 December and regional elections will follow in 2016.

The EU pays particular attention to the recurrent attempts to neutralise (downstream by a corrupt justice system) or usurp (upstream by political parties) the work of the anti-corruption investigation agency BIANCO (supported through a programme under the 11th EDF to improve administration for citizens) and to the treatment of witnesses testifying on specific corruption cases (e.g. Armand Marozafy and Patrick Zakariasy). The EU also follows very closely and carries out field missions to assess the evolution of corruption, arms trafficking and human rights abuses against the population by security forces during operations to fight cattle theft. For the President of Madagascar, the issue of cattle theft (affecting tens of thousands of zebus) became one of open banditry and organised crime affecting the economy and security of the country and leading to isolated cases of human rights abuses. In his opinion, only far-reaching reform of the security and justice sector can achieve a lasting reversal of this situation.

In 2015, the dialogue with civil society concentrated on corruption and human rights abuses but also on the decentralisation of power (municipal elections in July 2015) and the future support needs in this context. A visit by President Rajaonarimampianina to Brussels in November 2015 served as an opportunity for the European institutions to express their concern over the persistent corruption and the slow pace of governance reforms in the country, which undermine the people's ability to benefit from democracy.

Three meetings of the EU's Africa Working Party (COAFR) on Madagascar in 2015 helped to keep EU Member States informed about the sluggish progress on human rights in the country.

In early 2015, Madagascar committed to following all the recommendations of the UN Human Rights Council's UPR, and legally abolished the death penalty (which had never been enforced) in March 2015. Another important recommendation, the creation of the independent National Human Rights Council, is already budgeted for and is scheduled for implementation in 2016. In general, Madagascar was commended by the Council for having embarked on some improvements to human rights despite its difficulties in overcoming its political crisis.

In line with its four strategic priorities for human rights, in 2015 the EU continued to provide support for civic and electoral education in Madagascar, to promote children's rights through the national programme to facilitate access to education and to protect children against sexual tourism and prostitution, human trafficking and domestic exploitation. The EU also sought to improve detention conditions for minors and worked to promote women's rights through training and support for the economic and social emancipation of the most vulnerable in urban areas. Other areas of focus consisted of electoral training for the municipal elections, respect for human rights by the public administration and justice officials, and support for the legal professions. Projects were also financed to improve detention conditions and the social reintegration of detainees.

On Human Rights Day on 10 December, the EU Head of Delegation together with civil society organisations from Madagascar signed six new projects focusing on the above areas; eight others will follow in early 2016. Particular emphasis was placed on support for vulnerable groups to access their economic rights.

Malawi

In 2015, the EU's objectives for human rights and democracy in the framework of its relations with Malawi focused on political rights, democratic governance and the rights of vulnerable groups.

The overall human rights situation in the country remained fairly stable in 2015 and the main challenges continue to relate to gender equality and violence against women and children, high rates of child marriages, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, detention conditions in prisons, and economic and social rights. In addition, there were worrying reports in 2015 on violence and the killing of persons with albinism.

In coordination with EU Member States, the EU engaged in human rights and democracy discussions with Malawi in various formats, including through political dialogue and regular engagement with the Malawi Human Rights Commission.

EU support was provided to the electoral reform process that is looking into addressing challenges in the electoral system and the management of elections, including follow-up to the 2014 EU election observation mission.

At local level, the EU continued its support to civic education efforts through the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE), which focused on strengthening citizens' voices (including disadvantaged groups) with the aim of improving transparency, accountability and responsiveness of duty-bearers and service providers.

In May 2015, facilitated by EU support, Malawi's performance on human rights was reviewed under the Universal Periodic Review mechanism. Following the review, the government accepted 132 recommendations and rejected 41. The majority of the rejected recommendations refer to the death penalty and LGBTI issues.

As regards financial cooperation, Malawi benefited from EU support to improve human rights observance in the country through building the capacities of the Malawi Human Rights Commission. The assistance in 2015 focused on monitoring the implementation of human rights-related legislation and strengthening the institutional framework for prisons. The EU also provided support to on-the-spot investigations and the human rights-based approach to budget analysis.

The EU continued to support the gender equality agenda through the gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) project in partnership with UNFPA, as well as through smaller-scale work with local NGOs. Through its advocacy activities, the GEWE programme contributed to the finalisation and adoption by the parliament of the new Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Bill that sets the legal age for marriage at 18.

The EU and its Member States continued their support to local CSOs advocating for the rights of persons belonging to minorities and vulnerable groups, including LGBTI persons and persons with disabilities. The issue of children's rights is also being addressed through projects supporting improved child protection systems.

Mali

Mali witnessed two major events in 2015, namely the signature of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali by the Coordination coalition of armed groups on 15 May and 20 June, and a nationwide rise in insecurity and terrorist activity, which spread dangerously southwards.

The Foreign Affairs Council conclusions of 9 February reiterated the EU's commitment to supporting Mali's path towards development, peace, reconciliation and stability. Integral to that support is that progress is made by the Malian government in terms of governance, democracy, the rule of law, the reform of the justice and security sectors, and the fight against impunity. Stabilisation efforts must aim to establish security for the population, especially women and children.

The newly appointed EU Special Representative for the Sahel, Ángel Losada, made his first official trip to Bamako on 17-18 December to underline the importance of Mali for the EU, as well as the importance of respect for human rights and security issues.

The EU Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, Stylianides, visited Mali on 17 February and held discussions with President Keïta on the food shortages and child malnutrition issues faced by the Malian population.

The EU's democracy priorities relate to the reinforcement of the Malian state and its presence on the ground, especially in the north. The pursuit of this objective involves providing the Malian authorities with support to deliver free and transparent electoral processes, gender equality, good governance (including the fight against corruption and illicit enrichment), justice sector reform, and a modernisation and professionalisation of the Malian security forces through security sector reform.

Human rights are integrated into every aspect of this support, as respect for and the promotion of fundamental rights is the only way to achieve a lasting end to the current crisis, consolidate state structures and reinforce services.

The EU plays a major role in the follow-up process to the peace agreement, and currently chairs the socio-economic development sub-committee of the *Comité de suivi de l'Accord* (Agreement follow-up committee, CSA). This commitment to peace and stability is also demonstrated through an active contribution to the political dialogue on human rights, which engages the Malian authorities, civil society and armed groups in political consultation and negotiation. The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, EU Training Mission (EUTM) and EU capacity building mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali) have also integrated human rights modules into their training.

The 15 members of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission were appointed on 14 October 2015, although it has yet to become operational.

The law setting a gender quota for elected and appointed public officials was enacted in December and ushered in a new era for gender equality in the Malian public sector.

At operational level, the EU took action to promote and protect human rights on several occasions in 2015. For instance, through the EIDHR emergency grant, a human rights defender and his family were temporarily taken to safety outside the country.

Other initiatives under the EIDHR addressed issues such as street children, the rights of prisoners, and support to civil society in its role in monitoring human rights abuses.

A significant grant of EUR 250 000 over two years was granted to the National Human Rights Commission to support its statutory activity and reform. In addition, four major grant contracts were signed in 2015 for a total amount of EUR 1 500 000, covering forced marriages, child abuse and exploitation, and the promotion of citizenship among young people (especially in the north).

The EU Delegation in Bamako and the EU Member States continued to contribute to the electoral process support project (PAPEM). Having been postponed in 2015, administrative elections should be held in 2016. In 2015, work under the PAPEM focused on carrying out a population census for the civil registry office, with the aim of improving the scope for free, representative and transparent democratic elections.

Special funds from the 10th EDF were allocated to the justice sector reform supported by the EU. The programme seeks to provide structural assistance for the rehabilitation of detention centres and a multilevel approach to the reform of the justice sector.

Mauritania

The EU's human rights objectives in 2015 continued to focus on a series of priorities for Mauritania, such as the improvement of the justice system, the fight against slavery, ethnic and gender discrimination, the status of NGOs, the abolition of the death penalty, and the fight against torture, ill-treatment and enforced disappearances. Special attention was also paid to ethnic conflicts and freedom of (religious) expression.

Two significant legislative developments took place during 2015: the adoption of two laws, one criminalising torture and other inhuman or cruel practices as crimes against humanity, and one establishing a national preventive mechanism (NPM) for the prevention of torture and ill-treatment. The adoption of a new anti-slavery law replaced the one from 2007 and doubled the maximum prison sentence for the crime of slavery from 10 to 20 years. It also finally recognised the right of civil society organisations (but only those fulfilling a set of criteria) to lodge complaints in courts as a civil party on behalf of the victims. It also provided for free legal assistance for victims and referred to their right to reparation.

A worrying development was the adoption by the Council of Ministers of a draft law on associations without prior public consultations with civil society; the draft maintains the current system, which requires prior authorisation to be sought and gives discretionary powers to the Ministry of the Interior in respect of NGOs and political parties.

Despite legal and institutional progress on human rights over the last few years, in particular with the adoption of international conventions, the international community continued to voice serious concerns in a number of areas and pointed to the lack of any real implementation of legislation. Persistent problems include government control over the judiciary; impunity and a lack of accountability; abusive treatment by law enforcement officers; limits on freedom of assembly; violence against women; child, early and forced marriage; racial and ethnic discrimination; and child labour. Inhuman prison conditions, arbitrary arrests and lengthy pre-trial detention still need to be addressed.

In June 2015 the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards (CAS) examined Mauritania's compliance with the Forced Labour Convention, and focused on the ongoing problem of slavery.

The UN Universal Periodic Review of human rights in Mauritania took place in Geneva in November 2015. The majority of the recommendations concerned eliminating ongoing practices of slavery, human trafficking and torture, abolishing the death penalty, combating female genital mutilation (FGM), empowering women, protecting the rights of women and children, and ratifying a number of key human rights instruments.

The EU's regular dialogue with the authorities and human rights defenders is one of the main axes of the work of the EU Delegation in Mauritania. In 2015 the EU held two official meetings with human rights defenders and two political dialogue sessions with the government under Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement, which also covered human rights issues.

The EU provided support for the drafting of a new law to prevent all forms of violence against women, though its submission to parliament has been delayed. The EU Delegation has repeatedly emphasised the importance of its adoption. It has also advocated the need for better implementation of juvenile justice, in particular alternatives to the incarceration of youths alongside adults.

The following incidents were of particular significance, and were the subject of local statements issued by the EU: the stalemate in the legal case of Cheikh Ould Mohamed Ould M'Kheitar, which stalled at the appeal stage after he had been sentenced to death for apostasy at the end of 2014; and the sentencing of the leaders of the anti-slavery movement *Initiative de Resurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste*, Biram Ould Dah Abeid and Brahim Bilal Ramdhane, to two years imprisonment for participation in a non-authorised demonstration against slavery and land expropriation practices.

Three new projects were implemented under the EIDHR in 2015. They covered key strategic priorities such as the prevention of violence against young women employed as servants, the economic empowerment of former slaves, support for peaceful coexistence among communities, and the resolution of land disputes.

Republic of Mauritius

The EU's objectives for human rights and democracy in the framework of its relations with the Republic of Mauritius are to continue to promote respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law, with a particular focus on gender-based violence and violence against children. The EU continued to engage in human rights and democracy discussions with the Republic of Mauritius in various formats, including through policy dialogue and development cooperation. The eruption of corruption cases has raised concerns over governance issues in the country. The government has made transparency and good governance a core priority. However, some of the government's actions have been labelled as political vendettas by the opposition. The relegation of Mauritius to the Tier 2 watch list in the US State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report for 2015 is a cause for concern.

The EU carried out a demarche in April 2015 for Mauritius to accede to the UN Arms Trade Treaty. Mauritius acceded to this treaty in July 2015. In October 2015, the government of Mauritius deposited its instrument of accession to the Convention on Cluster Munitions. The EU also made a demarche on EU priorities at the UN Third Committee.

The EU issued HR/VP statements on the International Day against the Death Penalty.

During the year, the EU stepped up its dialogue with civil society organisations by participating in and contributing financially to campaigns to promote the rights of women with a view to revitalising national responses to gender-based violence, as well as raising awareness and creating public dialogue.

As regards financial cooperation, the Republic of Mauritius benefits from funding from the EU thematic budget line to support non-state actors. Following a call for proposals launched in 2013, the EU Delegation is implementing four contracts with NGOs active in the field of children's and women's rights.

In 2015 Mauritius received an envelope of EUR 0.1 million under the EIDHR for implementation of actions as from 2016. The programming of these funds will be determined after consultations with human rights defenders and other relevant stakeholders. Furthermore, the EU continued providing financial support to the Republic of Mauritius through the EUR 86 million budget support programme. Within this programme, two of the indicators relate to maternal health promotion and the reduction of child mortality.

Mozambique

The political tension and localised armed conflicts that followed the elections in October 2014 persisted during 2015. This has created additional stress on the democratic and reconciliation process and an environment in which human rights violations are increasingly likely, in spite of the positive steps taken by the Mozambican authorities in some areas.

The EU election observation mission to Mozambique conducted a return visit in February and released its final report with key recommendations for future elections. Furthermore, the EU continued to provide support to CSOs working on human rights, civic education, freedom of information and democracy, as well as to the parliament. In terms of Member States, Portugal organised exchange visits between the Mozambican and Portuguese parliaments and Finland supported policy research on democratisation at local universities.

Concerning the rule of law, a revised Penal Code entered into force in June 2015 legalising abortion and removing charges related to 'acts against nature', which was widely interpreted as the decriminalisation of homosexuality. The code simplifies a number of penal procedures, reduces pre-trial detention time and provides for non-custodial sentences.

The EU and a number of Member States supported capacity building in the justice sector. The EU provided support to the public prosecutor's office, the anti-corruption office and the Supreme Court. Portugal arranged cooperation between attorney generals. Germany supported the decentralisation of the justice system, the ombudsman and the Ethics Committee. The EU, Italy and Sweden also supported initiatives to improve access to an inclusive judicial system.

On freedom of expression, Mozambique dropped six places in the 2015 World Press Freedom Index (85/180). However, it adopted a law on access to information, which had been considered a major gap. The EU, and in particular Sweden, has supported civil society efforts to contribute to the new law and its regulation and, together with G14 Member States, held regular dialogue with the government to include a right to information in the general budget support performance assessment framework. The EU also promoted the dissemination of information by supporting the National Forum for Community Radios.

In March, Gilles Cistac, a constitutional law professor, was assassinated. The academic was known for his legal opinions on the constitutionality of RENAMO's proposal for autonomous provinces. In August a journalist, Paulo Machava, was shot dead, but there is still uncertainty over the motive. The investigations into the murders have not yet yielded results, and the EU continues to closely follow up on this issue, as well as on the murder of Judge Silica in 2014.

In August, a high-profile defamation trial took place against renowned academic Carlos Nuno Castel-Branco, who wrote a Facebook post criticising former President Guebuza, and journalist Fernando Mbanze, who re-published the text. Both defendants were acquitted. However, the Attorney's Office then lodged an appeal against both verdicts. The trial was observed by several Member States.

Efforts have also been carried out in support of freedom of association and of CSOs and platforms demanding domestic accountability, including support for the creation of worker's unions.

The EU and several Member States are also supporting activities related to gender equality and women's empowerment, with an emphasis on gender-based violence and child marriage. Almost 50 % of Mozambican girls still marry before the age of 18. Child marriage is illegal, yet not punished by law. In December a National Strategy to Prevent and Eliminate Child Marriage was adopted by the government. Other areas of EU activity include support for access to education, women's political participation and legal assistance. The EU and several Member States provide support to NGOs, trade unions and government activities that aim to raise public awareness about children's rights and the risk of abuse, while facilitating access to education and social services.

Mozambique's second UPR session will take place on 19 January 2016. While the government report underlined detention conditions and overcrowded prisons as one of the main challenges, the CSO shadow report focused instead on areas such as access to justice, sexual minorities, community rights and freedom of expression. Since its last UPR in 2011, Mozambique has taken steps to further strengthen its human rights framework, such as ratifying the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture, and passing a law on access to information. However, it has not yet fulfilled commitments to ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Neither have standing invitations to the special procedures of the Human Rights Council been extended. Continued reports of arbitrary detentions, excessive use of force and even killings by the police suggest that the recommendations to address these issues may not have been followed in a satisfactory manner. The Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions has been awaiting a reply from the government regarding a visit since 2008.

Reports of persecution of persons with albinism (murdered for black magic ceremonies) in parts of the country were also a cause of concern during 2015. The government has appointed a committee to draw up measures for the protection of people with albinism and public awareness campaigns about albinism are planned.

Namibia

Namibia has an advanced legislative framework for the protection of human rights and is part of most international conventions on the matter. It is also one of the few countries that have adopted a Human Rights Action Plan. It has implemented many UPR recommendations and also acknowledges key shortcomings concerning the situation of LGBTI individuals. Implementation of social and economic rights, however, is unsatisfactory. The 2011 UPR highlighted major shortcomings regarding access to justice, the situation in detention centres, the protection of minorities (in particular the San people), and gender-based violence.

The country fares well in the Freedom of Press Index as well as in the Ibrahim Index of African Governance. Over the last year, Namibia also considerably increased the participation of women in politics. Nevertheless, unemployment, poverty and inequality continue to be the key challenges faced by Namibia, and also affect the human rights situation in the country⁹. This socio-economic environment, coupled with drug and alcohol abuse, insufficient education and certain social attitudes, favours a climate in which violence against women and girls reaches significant levels.

A positive step concerning the rights of children was taken with the adoption of the much-awaited Child Care and Protection Bill in March 2015. It should enter into force in 2016. The EU and its Member States will closely follow up on the implementation of the bill. Recent EU outreach with the government on all forms of violence against children and women, conducted on 26 November 2015, confirmed that Namibia is well aware of these issues. Discussions mainly centred around child, early and forced marriage, which has been criminalised in Namibia's national legislation since independence. Nevertheless, there are still some problems regarding violence against children within the indigenous communities (and especially the San people).

A challenge that remains for children's rights concerns the issuing of birth certificates as these are automatically delivered in hospitals and thus those born at home or in remote areas are excluded.

Regarding indigenous peoples, the new government took some important steps in 2015. An ethnic San was appointed Deputy Minister for Marginalised Communities within the Office of the President in order to specifically look into the case of the San people and other marginalised communities. In June 2015 the Office of the Ombudsman finalised a White Paper on the rights of the marginalised communities. The ombudsman also lobbied for including the rights of the marginalised communities in the National Human Rights Action Plan 2015-2019.

⁹ 29 % of Namibia's population is classified as poor or severely poor, the Gini coefficient is at 0.58 and the unemployment rate is at 33.8 %.

The verdict in the Caprivi treason trial was finally delivered in September 2015. As Namibia's longest trial, concerning a secessionist armed attack in the Caprivi Strip, it had been a stain on Namibia's human rights record for years. It is a trial without parallel in Namibian legal history, involving an unprecedentedly large number of accused who stood trial on a total of 278 charges over a period of close to 12 years. The trial acquitted 35 people accused of high treason, murder and attempted murder and found 30 people guilty on the same charges. Those acquitted after spending 12 years in prison have started the process of civil action against the state for unlawful detention.

In 2015, besides conducting demarches on human rights issues, the EU and its Member States supported activities in Namibia relating to torture prevention, the strengthening of the parliament, gender equality, children's rights, indigenous people, and capacity building for NGOs and those working in the area of civil rights. The EU Working Group on Human Rights meets on a regular basis to discuss democracy and human rights. In 2015, the European Union financed a programme to strengthen the performance and domestic accountability of the parliament so as to support its involvement in Namibia's development agenda. The EU is also supporting a project to strengthen civil society's contribution to sustainable development and socio-economic justice in Namibia. A third EU programme in Namibia focuses on assisting the government, and in particular the Ministry of Education, to achieve fair access to good-quality, efficient education service delivery at the lower levels of education, and to reduce inequalities in terms of school access and quality through needs-based planning. Through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Civil Society and Local Authorities (CSO-LA) thematic budget line, the EU is also supporting Namibian and European NGOs in implementing several projects in the following areas: access to justice; elections and voter education; gender-based violence; orphans and vulnerable children, including children with hearing disabilities; vulnerable adolescents, including those living with HIV/AIDS; LGBTI issues; and fostering the decentralisation process.

Niger

The human rights situation in Niger did not progress in 2015, despite some efforts by the authorities. This is mainly due to entrenched institutional weaknesses and a worsened security situation that hampers structural reforms and the implementation of international human rights. Moreover, since Niger is one of the main transit countries from West Africa towards Europe, it has to deal with irregular migration and related trafficking, as well as with returnees and stranded migrants from other countries.

The increased presence of Boko Haram in the south east represents a major aggravating factor, with daily attacks on the civilian population and security forces. The fight against Boko Haram has also provoked human rights abuses by the security forces, who are not always prepared to respect international norms. This has been evident in their handling of massive population displacements and in the arrests of hundreds of people, including children, human rights defenders and journalists.

The security situation, the state of emergency declared in the Diffa region and the tense pre-electoral climate (presidential and legislative elections took place in February 2016) have led to some abuses of power by the security establishment, in particular in relation to freedom of expression, of assembly and of the press. Violent anti-Charlie Hebdo demonstrations in January 2015 provoked the destruction of numerous Christian churches and property, and resulted in the deaths of dozens of people. Despite the rapid reaction of the authorities, this sudden increase in violence illustrates the growing presence of religion in the socio-economic life of the country and a significant spread of radical beliefs. Moreover, the end of the year was marked by the announcement of a failed coup, once again demonstrating the tense political climate.

Discrimination and violence against women still occur in Niger. Despite being aware of the consequences of uncontrolled demographic growth, the Nigerien authorities are confronted with the weight of tradition and thus are unable to make progress in allowing women to be better educated. This was made clear by the National Assembly's inability to make progress on the Family Code regarding issues of child, early and forced marriages, as well as by the fact that it has been impossible to lift Nigerien reservations on the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

EU human rights priorities in Niger include respect for democratic principles and the rule of law; the enhancement of the justice system, especially access to justice and detention conditions; and the protection of women's and children's rights. These priorities are outlined in specific initiatives such as the Gender Action Plan and the roadmap for engagement with civil society. Political dialogue meetings under Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement have been an essential tool for transmitting the EU's human rights concerns to the government. The EU Delegation in Niamey was also in contact with the Nigerien authorities concerning the preparations for the UN Universal Periodic Review of human rights which will take place in January 2016.

It is worth highlighting a number of actions that took place in 2015. On International Human Rights Day, the EU Delegation in Niamey carried out two initiatives related to the fight against all forms of violence against women and children, focusing on child, early and forced marriage and on female genital mutilation (FGM). Four new projects were approved under the EIDHR covering the improvement of prison conditions, including the living conditions of imprisoned minors, and the fight against child marriage. The EUCAP Sahel Niger mission continues to train the security forces and some justice stakeholders on the correct implementation of anti-terrorist legislation in full compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law, criminal law, and the protection of victims and vulnerable groups such as women, children and refugees.

Nigeria

The EU's engagement on human rights and democracy in Nigeria in 2015 centred mostly on the year's priorities, such as the presidential elections, the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency, the reform of the security and justice sector, the abolition of the death penalty, and children's rights.

The 2015 general elections were historic, with the opposition winning for the first time since the transition from military rule in 1999 and with a peaceful handover of power. The Nigerian people demonstrated a commitment to democracy and set an example for other African countries.

However, it must also be said that the highly competitive elections were marred by incidents of violence, abuse of incumbency and attempts at manipulation. The death toll from election-related violence was reported at 160 people killed. The EU deployed an election observation mission (EOM), which was praised by various election stakeholders for its positive contribution to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

The new president, Muhammadu Buhari, who took office at the end of May, emphasised the new government's commitment to human rights, particularly in relation to the fight against the Boko Haram insurgency which continued to result in serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in 2015. Despite advances by Nigerian and neighbouring armed forces, and the recovery of most Boko Haram-controlled areas, insurgents continued to target civilians through bombs and suicide attacks, as well as through murder, torture, rape, forced marriages, the recruitment of child soldiers and the destruction of schools and property. More than 3 600 civilians died as a result of Boko Haram attacks in 2015. The terrorist group also extended attacks to neighbouring countries Chad, Niger and Cameroon, becoming a regional threat to peace and security. The humanitarian fallout from the violence is reported to be the fastest-growing crisis in Africa, with an estimated 2.2 million internally displaced persons and over 190 000 Nigerians who have fled to neighbouring countries.

The heavy-handed approach to the insurgency by the Nigerian army continued. In a report released in June 2015, Amnesty International alleged that the Nigerian army had unlawfully killed over 1 200 people, while 7 000 men and boys had died in military detention. The report called for an investigation into war crimes by senior Nigerian military officers. The alleged mass killings of hundreds of Shiite Muslim protesters belonging to the Islamic Movement of Nigeria Group in Zaria, Kaduna State, by the Nigerian military in December 2015 is also deeply concerning. The Nigerian army also came under severe criticism after the violent clashes in the northern city of Zaria, Kaduna state, in December 2015, which prompted the EEAS spokesperson to issue a statement calling for a thorough investigation to be launched in order to identify those responsible and bring them to justice. According to a subsequent report released by Amnesty International in April 2016, more than 350 people were killed following the confrontations between members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) and the Nigerian army.

Violation of the rights of children also remained a problem in Nigeria. According to the findings of the Nigerian Violence Against Children Survey (VACS), 60 % of Nigerian children under the age of 18 experience some form of physical, emotional or sexual violence. The VACS, published in 2015 and supported by the EU, was the first of its kind in West Africa. Furthermore, the UNSG annual report on children and armed conflict put Boko Haram on the list of parties that recruit or use children, kill or maim children, commit rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, or engage in attacks on schools and/or hospitals.

There was some progress on the legislative front, with a number of promising laws enacted before ex-President Goodluck Jonathan handed over power in May 2015, including the Administration of Criminal Justice Act, setting out a comprehensive framework for overhauling the sector, and the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, addressing violence against women and girls. Bills on the prohibition of torture and on persons with disabilities are at an advanced stage in the National Assembly.

Since the new government was not appointed and in place until 11 November, no formal EU-Nigeria ministerial dialogue or EU-Nigeria human rights dialogue could be organised in 2015. But the local EU Working Group on Human Rights met regularly and invited several human rights activists and professionals in order to continue its engagement with civil society.

Furthermore, the EU and its Member States undertook several actions in 2015, locally and at HQ level, to push for further progress in the area of human rights and democracy. On 9 February 2015, the Foreign Affairs Council issued conclusions on the Boko Haram insurgency, while numerous HR/VP and spokesperson statements were published on the elections, on the deadly attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram and on the pardon granted to an inmate on death row. Urgency debates in the European Parliament featured Nigeria twice in 2015: in January to address the atrocities in northern Nigeria, and in October to address the dire situation of children affected by the ongoing insurgency. Through the EIDHR, a new project was launched to promote the passage of the Death Penalty Moratorium Bill and to maintain strategic campaigns for the abolition of death penalty, in addition to providing pro bono legal services to prisoners on death row or at risk of being sentenced to death. Another four EIDHR projects were launched in 2015 targeting children's rights. EU demarches to the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs were made in support of EU priorities and initiatives, in particular those of the 29th Human Rights Council. To observe International Human Rights Day 2015, France and the EU Delegation organised an event on violence against women and girls with the screening of the film 'The Man Who Mends Women' and the active participation of Sakharov Prize winner Hauwa Ibrahim as one of the speakers.

Rwanda

The main positive human rights development in 2015 was the formal deposit of the ratification instrument for the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT) on 1 July 2015 (entry into force on 30 July 2015). While this has yet to be followed by the establishment of the national preventive mechanism, the ratification of the OPCAT is a significant formal commitment by Rwanda to prevent human rights abuses such as torture by opening up to formal international oversight.

As outlined during the 2015 Universal Periodic Review of the country, human rights-related challenges remain in the areas of freedom of expression and freedom of the media, civil society development, freedom of association, and other areas related to political rights. The 2013 Media Law has yet to be properly implemented in a way that would leave regulation primarily to an independent body rather than to the government. Freedom of speech would be further strengthened if legislation – and its implementation by the state – aimed to protect the rights of the individual, rather than to restrict and control expression. Despite past reform and government efforts to introduce more transparency, the regulatory framework for non-governmental organisations remains burdensome and hinders the development of a vibrant national civil society capable of contributing to policy dialogue, service delivery and job creation. There were several cases of civil society organisations not being able to register in 2015.

The EU continued to engage on human rights with the government, civil society organisations, human rights defenders and other stakeholders in 2015, both through political dialogue and operational activities. Political dialogue (Article 8 of the EU-ACP Cotonou Agreement), which remains the main platform for engagement with the government in this area, was focused in 2015 on Rwanda's constitutional review process and the issues of the media and freedom of expression, and civil society and freedom of association, as well as other human rights issues. It was agreed that the EU and the government of Rwanda would follow up in 2016 with more focused engagement on the implementation of the 2015 UPR recommendations.

Apart from Article 8 political dialogue, the EU also engaged with relevant governmental ministers on specific human rights issues such as the media and detention cases. The EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Stavros Lambrinidis, who visited Rwanda in 2015 for the EU-AU human rights dialogue, took this opportunity to advocate for Rwanda to become a member state of the International Criminal Court and for the country to enlarge the space for the exercise of freedom of expression and the media. The EU issued local statements on freedom of expression (on World Press Freedom Day in March 2015), and a more specific statement on media freedom in June 2015 following the indefinite suspension of BBC broadcasts in Kinyarwanda.

On the non-governmental level, the EU held monthly meetings with human rights defenders on topics including the UPR process, freedom of association and detention issues, as well as ad hoc meetings with other representatives of civil society organisations. Such meetings should become more structured in the light of the newly developed EU roadmap for engagement with civil society.

On the operational side, the EU also provided financial support to the *Ligue des droits de la personne dans la région des Grands Lacs* (League for the rights of the person in the Great Lakes Region, LDGL) to prepare a UPR shadow report, and launched a call for proposals in support of civil society and human rights organisations. In the area of civil society support, the call focused on budget transparency and citizen participation in the monitoring of policy implementation, capacity building for community radio stations, and enhancing the free flow of information between the government and other stakeholders. In the area of human rights, the call focused on citizen participation in the democratic and election processes; the rights of detainees, including access to legal aid in the criminal justice system; and alternative measures to detention in the pre- and post-trial phases. The EU and the Member States' embassies also supported several projects to strengthen the media in Rwanda through capacity building for the self-regulatory body Rwanda Media Commission, support for radio broadcasts of debates on political issues, and support to community radio stations which engage citizens.

São Tomé and Príncipe

EU priorities in São Tomé and Príncipe as regards human rights and democracy include the ratification of international human rights treaties, support measures for the judicial system, the abolition of ill-treatment by police forces, efforts to fight corruption, and raising awareness of the need to combat discrimination. In 2015, the government took several positive steps to make progress on these issues. For instance, on 5 November 2015 São Tomé ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The EU welcomed this important development through an EU local statement.

São Tomé and Príncipe underwent its second Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in October 2015. The review acknowledged progress made since the last UPR in 2011 and encouraged the country to ratify additional human rights instruments.

São Tomé has been affected by repeated changes of administration in recent years, as successive governments have lasted on average two out of the mandated four years. This trend seems to have been reversed by the 2014 elections, which brought to power a government supported by the majority of the National Assembly (60 %). Also noteworthy is the fact that this is the second government since 1990 to have majority support in the National Assembly. This political stability is seen as a positive opportunity for the government to address long-neglected issues such as establishing a national human rights institution in line with the Paris Principles and further protecting the human rights of women and children.

The country was allocated EUR 150 000 under the EIDHR. The call for proposals was launched in the first half of 2015 and focused on tackling gender-based discrimination and on improving women's participation in social, economic and public life. The contract was signed in December 2015 with a local NGO and the project will further complement an ongoing initiative on the prevention of gender-based violence.

Senegal

Senegal's overall human rights situation is satisfactory. However, the rights of women, children and LGBTI persons remain of concern. In 2015, the EU engaged in both public diplomacy and development cooperation with actions focusing on these areas, as well as on impunity, support for the peace process in the Casamance region, and freedom of association and expression. These priorities were also addressed during the political dialogue and specific meetings with line ministries and civil society organisations.

Family, penal and labour laws continue to discriminate against women and hamper their access to social and economic rights. Access to health (including safe abortion), education, work, land, credit and justice remains problematic, especially in rural areas. Sexual violence against women, including harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage, persists. Protective measures, notably the law on parity and against FGM, continue to be poorly enforced. The authorities have shown willingness to adopt a bill that would allow medical abortion in a limited number of cases.

The situation of child beggars (*talibés*) attending Qur'anic schools (*daaras*) deteriorated in 2015. Prosecution remained marginal despite several violent deaths of *talibés* throughout the country. The 2013 draft bill to regulate and modernise the *daaras* remains in limbo. However, the government is stepping up efforts to refurbish the *daaras* and improve the quality of teaching.

The EU highlighted the need to implement existing laws and recommendations with regard to the rights of women and children during its Article 8 political dialogue in June. To celebrate the 2015 International Women's Day, the EU Delegation participated in a round table on the role of the media in promoting gender equality, organised by local NGOs. The Delegation also undertook a demarche on violence against women and children, focusing in particular on child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and female genital mutilation (FGM). On the development cooperation side, EUR 4.2 million was provided to strengthen CSOs' capacities to protect, support and raise awareness about children's rights.

Concerning the fight against impunity, the historic trial against former Chadian president Hissène Habré for war crimes, crimes against humanity and torture opened in Dakar before the Extraordinary African Chambers.

At the domestic level, the Supreme Court upheld the six-year prison sentence and hefty fine for illicit enrichment which the special anti-corruption court (*Cour de repression de l'enrichissement illicite*, CREI) had handed down against Karim Wade (the son of former President Abdoulaye Wade and a former minister). In response to criticism of the CREI's respect for international judicial standards, legality and legitimacy expressed by the UN and a number of civil society organisations, the government announced its intention to create an Appeals Chamber.

During 2015, the government stepped up efforts to reduce pre-trial detention periods and improve detention conditions with projects to build new prisons and provide training to prison staff. A bill enshrining the right to access a lawyer in civil cases is pending.

EU actions with regard to the fight against impunity included participating in the Steering Committee of the Hissène Habré trial, providing financial assistance to strengthen Senegal's rule of law (courts, prisons, training, awareness raising), and funding capacity building for the Senegalese Court of Auditors. The EU provided more than EUR 400 000 to support the national anti-fraud and corruption office (OFNAC) in the areas of training, awareness raising, communication and investigations.

In 2015, President Macky Sall repeatedly expressed support for the criminalisation of homosexuality. Overall, discrimination, harassment and stigmatisation of LGBTI individuals continues in Senegal. Pervasive homophobia, an overzealous police force and an often conservative judiciary have resulted in more and harsher sentences for gay men. Moreover the trials for same-sex relations are characterised by various violations of basic procedural safeguards, the use of low evidentiary thresholds and public defamation. Other worrying trends are the increasing reluctance of human rights organisations to publicly defend the rights of LGBTI persons and the increasingly homophobic rhetoric and actions of Islamic NGOs.

Overall, the situation in the Casamance region, which is subject to a long-term low-level separatist conflict, improved during the year. The peace process remains fragile but continues to enjoy the commitment of the authorities. The EU supported the peace process through a EUR 3 million programme under the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP). Furthermore, the EU continued its support for the development of the Casamance region through the European Development Fund, for a total of EUR 35 million.

A new presidential decree tightened control over NGOs by defining them primarily as service providers whose budgets and interventions must be pre-approved with regard to the government's development policies. The EU and several Member States approved a roadmap for engaging with Senegalese CSOs. The roadmap aims to foster dialogue and constructive relationships between the Senegalese authorities and these organisations and to strengthen their capacities.

With regard to press freedom, and as in previous years, on several occasions journalists were detained for press offences and released. President Sall withdrew his support for the draft Press Code decriminalising such offences and the bill remains in limbo in parliament.

Republic of Seychelles

The EU objectives for human rights and democracy in its relations with the Republic of Seychelles include consolidating the electoral reform process, following up on the implementation of the UPR and supporting the domestication of international conventions and treaties.

The presidential elections in December 2015 showed a high degree of democratic maturity in Seychelles. They were conducted in a peaceful, orderly and transparent manner, were more competitive than ever before, with six candidates.

The EU continued to engage in human rights and democracy discussions with Seychelles in various formats, including a political dialogue under Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement undertaken in July 2015.

The EU has repeatedly reiterated its pleas for the democratic environment to be improved, with a focus on consolidating the electoral reform process and amending legal provisions for enhanced freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, non-discrimination against women and protection of the rights of children.

Sierra Leone

The progress achieved by Sierra Leone on human rights since the end of the civil war is commendable.. However, considerable challenges persist. EU human rights objectives include the abolition of the death penalty, gender equality, women's empowerment, the enforcement of legislation against child labour and exploitation, the reduction of poverty, and improved access to justice, health and education. The rights of people affected by large-scale land leasing and extractive industries also need continued attention. The EU raised international human rights issues with the government in the context of Sierra Leone's membership of the Human Rights Council, and continued to support projects to promote fundamental rights in the country.

In 2015, the human rights situation was largely dominated by the Ebola outbreak. It absorbed a great deal of the country's financial and human resources and is perceived to have had negative consequences on economic and social rights. Nevertheless, the Ebola-related state of public emergency and the very broad powers given to the executive did not give rise to broader human rights abuses, with the exception of some localised incidents.

In its third year as a member of the UN Human Rights Council, the country continued to play a constructive role. The last Universal Periodic Review dates back to 2011 and Sierra Leone is preparing for another peer review in January 2016. The government had accepted 126 out of 129 recommendations; three recommendations referring to sexual orientation and practices were noted..

On 2 July 2015, the parliament ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, commonly known as the Maputo Protocol. During the discussions in parliament, government and parliament representatives noted that there was no immediate intention to implement changes to harmful traditional practices such as FGM.

Implementation of stronger laws and increased access to justice for survivors of sexual and gender based violence would be needed. NGOs organised campaigns to stop the practice of FGM among girls below the age of 18.

On 5 November 2015, the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL), supported by the UK and Ireland, presented its report to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) at its 57th Session in Banjul. Sierra Leone fulfilled its reporting requirement under the African Charter for the first time since it was adopted by the OAU on 27 June 1981.

Announced several times, the discussion on the Criminal Procedure Act in the parliament is progressing well but has yet to be enacted. The act will allow the Chief Justice to issue regulations on policies – e.g. on bail and sentencing – and to reduce the backlog of cases and the number of people on remand in prisons.

The defamation, criminal libel and sedition aspects of the Public Order Act (1965) continue to be used to arrest and detain journalists. The situation of radio journalist David Baryoh, who was arrested and detained on several occasions and whose passport is retained by authorities, remains unresolved. He has submitted a case to Freetown High Court arguing against the decision taken by the Independent Media Commission (IMC) to suspend the 'Monologue' radio programme indefinitely.

In 2015, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development began drafting a new NGO policy. There are concerns that the new policy will lead to tighter controls over the operation of civil society organisations in Sierra Leone, through overly-onerous administrative requirements which unduly burden civil society organisations and have the effect in practice of limiting their operational capacity. In an attempt to address some of these issues, government was lobbied to ensure that the drafting process was more inclusive of civil society voices. The process is on-going.

Human rights, combined with specific measures to support gender equality and education as an important contribution to poverty reduction, are part of the national Agenda for Prosperity (2013-2018) launched by the government in July 2013. The EU supports this process. It also supports, via the UNDP-led basket fund, the constitutional review process for more inclusive democracy, enhanced social cohesion, conflict-prevention instruments and better protection of human rights. Due to Ebola, the deadline for the national Constitutional Review Committee to submit a report to the government and parliament was pushed back to March 2016 and a referendum is expected to take place in autumn 2017.

Through political dialogue and media outreach, the EU continues to support children's rights, in particular on the issue of child, early and forced marriage and the right to education/girls' education. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology continues to implement a policy of banning pregnant girls from attending mainstream education and sitting state exams. In 2015, a bridging project, supported by Ireland and the UK, was established to allow pregnant girls to continue their education, and lobbying continues in order to see the bans lifted. Through a children's rights project, the EU Delegation is strengthening the capacity of the Child Rights Coalition Sierra Leone and the children's networks to advocate for and monitor the promotion and protection of children's rights at national and district level.

The EU also promotes 'decent work and social dialogue' through an ongoing project which aligns labour laws with internationally recognised fundamental workers' rights. The project is closely associated with recent government strategies to address employment creation and rights for women and youth, as set out in the Agenda for Prosperity.

Somalia

Somalia is slowly emerging from decades of conflict and anarchy and the human rights situation continues to be especially critical. Despite attempts to improve the situation, large-scale human rights violations continued in 2015, including extrajudicial killings, violence against women and children, child trafficking, attacks against journalists and freedom of expression, arbitrary detention, and the use of the death penalty. The security situation remains generally volatile though the Somali authorities and the Somali National Army (SNA), supported by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), continued their efforts to defeat Al-Shabaab insurgency and limit as far as possible the large scale human rights violations, mainly attributed to the Al-Shabaab terrorist organization. Overall, the human rights situation will remain closely linked to political developments and the security situation in the country.

The Human Rights Working Group (HRWG) was chaired in 2015 by Sweden and Denmark. In addition to the EU and its Member States, Norway, Switzerland and the US also participate in the working group. The HRWG engaged throughout 2015 with Somali counterparts and international partners. In June 2015, it arranged joint meetings in Mogadishu to interact with partners and provide common messages. The HRWG also issued a press release to mark Human Rights Day on 10 December 2015.

During 2015, and with the overall objective of improving access to inclusive, equitable and accountable forms of security and protection for all Somalis, the EU focused on the rule of law, access to justice and the fight against impunity, thereby helping to foster an environment which is more conducive to respect for human rights. This included the use of mobile courts, the provision of legal aid, traditional dispute resolution, the training of police and custodial corps officers, the rebuilding of judicial infrastructure, and public and private diplomacy. The EU also engaged on freedom of speech and media freedom, for example by supporting detained journalists.

In line with the Human Rights Country Strategy, the EU has been at the forefront in supporting the democratisation processes in Puntland and Somaliland with the aim of increasing the effectiveness and accountability of state institutions. Furthermore, the EU is actively supporting the Somaliland elections planned for March 2017 to be credible and inclusive, by funding voter registration and technical support.

The EU has, alongside the UN, also been at the forefront in pushing for a credible and more inclusive electoral process to elect a new parliament and President in 2016. This has included holding the Somali authorities to account on their commitment to reserve 30 per cent of seats in both houses of Parliament for women. It is acknowledged that 'one person one vote elections' will not be feasible in 2016 but that the 2016 process will have an expanded electorate that should serve as a stepping stone to 'one person one vote' elections in 2020.

Due to the ongoing conflict situation, 2015 saw several serious cases of civilian casualties, but thanks notably to the engagement of the EU, a Civilian Casualty Tracking, Analysis and Response Cell was established within AMISOM. In support of child rights, the EU continued efforts to prevent child trafficking, targeting local authorities, policy makers, the police, immigration officers and affected communities. In addition, EU activities to prevent violence against children and stop grave violations of children's rights continued through support for the Somali government's action plans on ending the recruitment and use of child soldiers and the killing and maiming of children.

In January 2015, Somalia ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was originally signed in 2002. The instrument was deposited with the UN in October 2015.

Furthermore, in the light of the Human Rights Watch report of September 2014 on sexual abuse committed by AMISOM forces in Somalia, for example, the EU also focused on violence and sexual abuse against women, keeping in close contact with the AU and delivering several demarches.

With high levels of domestic support for capital punishment, Somalia is a difficult case for advocacy against the death penalty. Throughout 2015, the EU took a principled stance on the application of the death penalty in Somalia. EU Heads of Missions publicly criticised the ending of a multi-year de facto moratorium on application of the death penalty in Somaliland in March 2015. No further executions were carried out in Somaliland in 2015. The Somaliland human rights activist Guled Jama also spoke out against the executions and was subsequently jailed. The EU Delegation and several Member States intervened on his behalf with the Somaliland authorities and Guled Jama was subsequently released. Through the EIDHR Emergency Fund, the EU facilitated Guled Jama's evacuation from Somaliland, allowing him to recover in Europe and giving him the opportunity to carry out advocacy and lobbying efforts across a number of EU capitals.

On the World and European Day against the Death Penalty, EU Heads of Missions issued a press release on the death penalty in Somalia which also focused on due process, the use of military courts and the need to implement a moratorium on the death penalty in line with commitments in the latest UPR of 2011.

Somalia is up for a Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process in 2016, for which the Federal Government of Somalia has engaged constructively in preparations.

In 2015, the EU Delegation contracted a new set of actions (starting in 2016) through the EIDHR which specifically target the nexus between human rights and security. One of the main aims is to better connect human rights activists and organisations to government, including the police, legal professionals and the judiciary, in order to provide high-quality, accountable and rights-based safety and security services for victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and thereby break the culture of impunity for the perpetrators of such crimes.

South Africa

South Africa's impressive and progressive constitution enshrines human rights and protects basic political freedoms. In general, democratic institutions are functioning well and checks and balances are in place. The judiciary is independent in its action and the media and civil society have space to express themselves freely.

Unfortunately, despite South Africa's ambitious legal framework and the government's efforts, many of these rights remain on paper only. South Africa has to cope with a heavy historical legacy of disparity and discrimination, still unresolved in many ways, as well as economic challenges and a lack of capacity, all of which contribute to unequal opportunities, social tensions and violent responses, which disproportionately impact women and girls.

The EU and its Member States have traditionally supported the promotion and protection of human rights in South Africa in an integrated approach bringing together technical and financial assistance, public outreach and political dialogue. Financial assistance is channelled primarily through both the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the financing instrument for development cooperation (DCI). The EU Delegation and Member States also engage on public diplomacy activities on human rights issues in different formats and with different interlocutors and also express their support through regular contacts, public commitment, and dialogue. There is a long history of support to parliamentary institutions and effective engagement with public institutions (e.g. the Public Protector, the Human Rights Commission and the Commission for Gender Equality) and governmental bodies (e.g. the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development). Relations with civil society are regular, broad and fruitful. They range from interactions in the framework of implementation of EU-funded activities at grassroots and also national level, to consultations and structured dialogues.

The third annual EU-South Africa human rights dialogue, which took place in Pretoria on 11 December 2015 and was co-chaired by the EUSR for Human Rights, Stavros Lambrinidis, is a good example of frank and direct discussions that contribute to building trust and a better understanding of the respective positions. Following the dialogue, South Africa changed its 'no' vote on the UNGA resolution on human rights defenders to a 'yes' vote. South Africa also agreed to look into co-organising a joint event with the EU on torture, to engage more extensively with the EU in Geneva and New York, and to find a better approach to civil society interaction before the next dialogue. The EUSR also discussed with his counterparts the importance, both for South Africa and Africa more broadly, of supporting the International Criminal Court's work. The third human rights dialogue between South Africa and the EU was preceded by repeated engagement by the EU Special Representative for Human Rights with civil society organisations, human rights lawyers and the South African public, in the form of closed and public events.

The relationship with civil society organisations (CSOs) was strengthened in 2015. This has been backed by an EU roadmap for engagement with civil society in South Africa, in which the EU Delegation to South Africa identified the need to further support civil society's voice in key policy processes, including some underpinning the EU-South Africa Strategic Partnership. The roadmap followed a CSO seminar in late 2014 which brought together stakeholders from South Africa and the EU and resulted in recommendations in a number of areas relating to human rights, such as policing migration, racism, xenophobia, Afrophobia, gender equality and non-discrimination, children's rights, the rights of persons with disabilities, and space for civil society. This seminar provided a platform for discussion on topical human rights issues and on the enhancement of the protection and promotion of human rights in both geographical areas.

Engagement on human rights topics took various forms in 2015. It included support to CSO projects funded under DCI bilateral programmes (justice, education, health) and the EIDHR. It also consisted of a number of events, organised either by the EU Delegation through public diplomacy activities (such as the EU's 'Inspiring Thinkers' series and the Europe Day celebrations), by EU partners in the context of cultural events (such as the Tri-Continental Film Festival), or implemented by EU project beneficiaries or South African ministries with which the EU Delegation and some EU Member States have been associated. In 2015 these events mainly focused on the rights of persons with disabilities, gender equality and gender-based violence, LGBTI rights, migration and xenophobia.

In addition to these events, on International Human Rights Day, which was also the last day of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, the EU Delegation hosted a roundtable discussion on services accessible to women who are victims of violence. It was co-hosted by the Joint Gender Fund, which provides support to CSOs active on issues of gender-based violence in South Africa. Representatives from civil society organisations offering services for women (such as shelters, counselling, and rape crisis centres) and representatives from the South African government identified key challenges in resourcing these services, with an expectation of taking the discussions forward in the year to come.

With regard to President al-Bashir's visit to South Africa to attend the African Union summit, the EU issued a statement on 14 June calling on South Africa to act in accordance with UN Security Council resolution 1593 in executing the arrest warrant against any ICC indictee present in the country. The issue was also raised at the third human rights dialogue with South Africa.

South Sudan

The conflict that began in mid-December 2013 between factions loyal to President Salva Kiir and Vice-President Riek Machar continued in 2015. The conflict saw renewed intense fighting from April to June, before an Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCISS) was signed on 26 August 2015. Implementation by the parties of the ARCISS has been extremely slow; the Transitional Government of National Unity, which ought under the Agreement to have taken office in November, had not been constituted by the end of the year.

Numerous violations of the ceasefire have occurred and new conflicts in previously peaceful areas, notably the Equatorias, have erupted and merged into the main conflict.

Many thousands died in the conflict, although it is impossible to establish the exact number of fatalities. A commission of inquiry on South Sudan was established by the African Union to investigate matters relating to the crisis, including human rights abuses. The commission's report, published in October 2015, concluded that there were reasonable grounds to believe that during the conflict crimes such as murder, extermination, indiscriminate killing of civilians, killings of soldiers while *hors de combat*, torture (including acts of forced cannibalism), rape, persecution on political grounds, forced enlistment of child soldiers, and inhuman and degrading treatment were committed in various parts of South Sudan. There were also grounds to believe that these crimes were committed in a widespread or systematic manner. Most atrocities were committed against civilians taking no part in the conflict. Some 16 000 children are estimated to have been recruited as child soldiers during the conflict. The commission drew attention to the exceptional brutality of the violations committed, noting reports of people being burnt in places of worship and in hospitals, mass killings, women of all ages being subjected to gang rape, and persons not simply being shot but subjected to beatings before being compelled to jump into a fire. The commission noted that these crimes could constitute crimes against humanity or war crimes and called for further investigation to establish individual responsibility. Chapter V of the ARCISS provides for the establishment of a transitional justice mechanism, including a hybrid court mandated to investigate and prosecute individuals responsible for violations of international law.

About 1.66 million South Sudanese remained internally displaced and a further 645 000 sought refuge in neighbouring countries. The AU Commission's report noted that in many cases, internally displaced persons had been lured out of Protection of Civilians camps and then killed, raped or beaten; these attacks were undertaken with a view to spreading terror among internally displaced persons.

Some 4.6 million South Sudanese were estimated to be suffering severe food insecurity and to be in need of humanitarian assistance during 2015.

More than 245 000 children under five were expected to be severely undernourished. The provision of international humanitarian assistance was frequently impeded by the warring parties. Both government and opposition forces pillaged the offices of aid agencies and markets and destroyed infrastructure, thereby hampering relief efforts. Numerous attacks on hospitals and clinics were recorded.

The South Sudanese authorities, especially the National Security Service (NSS), severely restricted freedom of expression. Security forces intimidated and arbitrarily detained journalists, shut down newspapers and forced radio stations to stop broadcasting. Civil society activists were also intimidated. In December 2015, 13 activists who had accused government forces of committing abuses against civilians were arrested by the NSS in Wau, accused of being rebel allies and of bringing 'public dishonour' to the state government. An NSS Bill was adopted that gave sweeping powers of surveillance, arrest and detention to NSS officers, as well as broad immunity, but did not accompany these powers with adequate rights of due process.

In April, South Sudan acceded to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Convention against Torture and its Optional Protocol, and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol.

The EU actively supported efforts to conclude and implement the ARCISS; in particular, the EU provided assistance to support the establishment of the various administrative bodies envisaged in the agreement, including transitional justice mechanisms. The EU imposed travel bans and asset freezes on military leaders who endangered the peace process, and an arms embargo imposed in July 2011 remained in place. In October 2015, the Council of the European Union adopted conclusions expressing its shock at the horrific violations of human rights in South Sudan and calling for accountability. The EU called for the transitional justice mechanisms outlined in the peace agreement to be implemented as a matter of priority and for those responsible for human rights violations to be held to account. The EU reiterated its condemnation of human rights violations in South Sudan in a series of statements during the year. In the UN Human Rights Council, the EU called for the creation of a mandate holder on South Sudan and encouraged close cooperation between the AU and the UN. The EU provided both financial and political support to individual human rights defenders in South Sudan.

Sudan

Over the course of 2015, the human rights situation in Sudan showed no overall improvement and deteriorated in some areas. The conflicts in Darfur, Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile continued. Given the political environment, the 2015 elections could not be credible and President al-Bashir secured his position for another term. Serious human rights violations were perpetrated with impunity by state actors, government-supported militia and rebel forces, with no regard for Sudan's interim constitution of 2005, international commitments, or recommendations presented to the Human Rights Council. There were continued occurrences of humanitarian access issues, attacks against civilians, including indiscriminate aerial bombardments and scorched-earth tactics, gender-based violence, extrajudicial killings, and arbitrary detention. The situation in Sudan remained compounded by the general lack of accountability.

In 2015, efforts towards peace and human rights remained a priority for the EU. The EU, in particular through the EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa, Alexander Rondos, supported efforts towards a holistic and inclusive political solution in Sudan. Political and financial support was provided to the mediation efforts led by President Mbeki in the framework of the AU High-Level Implementation Panel for Sudan and South Sudan. The EU considered that the gravity of the human rights situation in Sudan required continued attention from the UNHRC and therefore supported the extension of the mandate of the Independent Expert on Sudan while pushing strongly for his full access to all areas of the country. While no dialogue between the EU and the government in the field of human rights could take place in 2015, the EU continued to support capacity building for national human rights institutions and to foster international coordination around human rights issues through chairing the International Partners Forum for Human Rights. Dialogue with civil society also took place regularly.

The EU was also active in advocating for freedom of expression and media freedom in the context of the national dialogue and the elections. The EU issued several statements calling on the government to respect freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and the media, to release detainees and give them an opportunity for fair trial, and to conduct a credible investigation into the human rights violations that led to killings, injuries and material damage. The EU continuously monitored court cases against several political figures and activists. It also carried out silent diplomacy in a number of individual cases of human rights abuses against political activists. Under the EIDHR thematic programme, the EU supported several projects on civic and human rights education, as well as press freedom.

In particular, the EU Delegation followed with great concern the detention of two South Sudanese pastors in Sudan, observing their hearings and raising the issue at political level in dialogues with the Sudanese authorities with a view to sending a strong political signal of the importance the EU attaches to freedom of religion and belief, freedom of expression, and the right to a fair trial.

The disastrous situation in Darfur continued to retain the attention of the EU. On several occasions, the EU voiced its concern about the continuing fighting and widespread displacement of civilians in Darfur and also cautioned against the departure of UNAMID, which must take place only once certain benchmarks are met, in particular a political solution to Darfur's conflicts, enhanced security, and arrangements for civilians and the internally displaced.

The EU Delegation also organised several public events in support of human rights and promoted women's and children's rights in Sudan through development projects and through local dialogue with national and international partners.

Finally, the EU is supporting several human rights organisations and CSOs through the EIDHR and NSA-LA thematic programmes, with the objective of strengthening their capacities and advocacy skills, supporting coordination and networking, and promoting a more favourable environment for CSOs.

Swaziland

Chapter 3 of the national constitution adopted in 2005 provides for a 'Bill of Rights', which guarantees respect for and the promotion of fundamental rights and freedoms. However, there is still concern in the country that specific laws restrict citizens from fully enjoying these rights.

Whilst political parties are free to operate, they cannot participate in the formation of government as people are elected into parliament based on individual merit. The Public Order Act of 1988 grants the Commissioner of Police the right to sanction any public gathering and this adversely affects freedom of assembly and association.

The harassment and arrest of political leaders continued in 2015 under the Suppression of Terrorism Act of 2008, which is viewed as an instrument used by the authorities to suppress any dissenting voices in the country. After spending more than 12 months in jail having been denied bail, Mario Masuku, the President of PUDEMO (People's United Democratic Movement), and Maxwell Dlamini, the Secretary General of SWAYOCO (Swazi Youth Congress), were released from custody by the Court of Appeal after submitting a third application for bail. Regarding the death penalty, Swaziland has a de facto moratorium and the last execution took place in 1983. During the UN session in 2015, Swaziland for the first time did not oppose the resolution on the moratorium on the use of the death penalty.

Ratification of international human rights conventions and protocols does not seem to be a problem for the country. The challenge lies in the implementation of conventions such as CEDAW, evidenced by the fact that women continue to hold a minority status in the socio-economic and political activities of the country.

Access to justice remains a challenge in the country due to the costs involved. Moreover, prior to the dismissal of the Chief Justice in May 2015, the independence of the judiciary was questionable as there were serious allegations of cases being discussed and decided by the ex-Chief Justice and the former Minister for Justice before being brought to court.

In 2014, freedom of expression and freedom of the media were curtailed following the arrest of Bheki Makhubu, a magazine editor, and Thulani Maseko, a human rights lawyer. The two were convicted of contempt of court for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression. On 21 May 2015, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on Swaziland expressing its concern over serious human rights violations following the arrests of both of the accused. After they had served 15 months of their two-year sentences, in June 2015 the Supreme Court of Swaziland ordered the release of Mr Maseko and Mr Makhubu.

The resolution of the European Parliament on this matter contributed to increased international awareness of Swaziland, as well as shedding light on the country's negative human rights record.

The 104th International Labour Conference decided to keep Swaziland in a 'special paragraph' (which entails being under close watch by the ILO) due to its persistent non-compliance with ILO Convention 87 concerning Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise.

On 1 January 2015, Swaziland was effectively excluded from the US trade programme, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), due to concerns related to workers rights.

The EU Delegation, in collaboration with other stakeholders, undertook a number of actions to promote human rights in Swaziland in 2015. The EU continued to engage the Swazi authorities on matters of human rights and democracy through the Article 8 political dialogue. The EU also expressed concern about the new Public Service Bill of 2015, which contains regressive provisions in relation to the political standing of civil servants.

The EU has provided financial support to CSOs through a number of financial instruments such as the EIDHR, CSO-LA thematic budget lines and the EDF, for projects focusing on issues such as cultural rights, children's and women's rights, and access to justice and information. The funding has been used to support political reform and the electoral system by providing training for CSOs on negotiation skills, communication and diplomacy. With the support of the EU, CSOs have produced a shadow report outlining the human rights situation in the country. The report proposes some recommendations on how the human rights concerns can be addressed. Given that violence against children and women in the country remains very high, in 2015 the EU supported a number of initiatives to improve the status of women, and advocacy initiatives were conducted to lobby for the enactment of the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Bill into law.

Tanzania

Tanzania's preparations for general elections in October 2015 provided a specific context for the EU's human rights monitoring and brought political rights increasingly to the fore. The maintenance of political space, the inclusiveness of the electoral process, media freedom and the right to information and freedom of association all featured among the EU's top priorities.

A political dialogue, a key feature of bilateral relations under Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement for discussing issues of human rights and the rule of law, did not take place between Tanzania and the EU in 2015. However, there were regular consultations on human rights with national stakeholders, such as the Commission on Human Rights and Good Governance, political parties and civil society, including the Coalition of Human Rights Defenders.

EU support for the electoral preparations was channelled through a UNDP-managed basket fund, the Democratic Empowerment Project. It provided financial and technical assistance to the National Electoral Commission and the Zanzibar Electoral Commission, and promoted election-related legal and institutional reforms as well as civic and voter education. The EU monitored the process of biometric voter registration and sent a full-scale election observation mission, led by Judith Sargentini, Member of the European Parliament, for the general elections in October. A project aimed at conflict prevention and mediation was launched ahead of the elections in Zanzibar, with the involvement of all relevant electoral stakeholders. The EU Delegation and EU Member States issued a local statement a few days after election day, expressing their concern about the decision of the chairman of the Zanzibar Electoral Commission (ZEC) to annul the elections on Zanzibar, particularly since all the international observers had given a positive assessment of the voting process. The statement further urged the ZEC to resume and complete the tally and announce the results of the vote, and called on all stakeholders to engage in constructive dialogue as the primary means to resolve differences and to preserve the democratic and economic gains made in the course of many years of prolonged effort.

Concerning media freedom and the right to information, in early 2015 the suspension of *The East African*, a renowned weekly newspaper, prompted the EU to issue a local statement highlighting the importance of safeguarding freedom of expression, the right to information and the need for fair and balanced media legislation. A speech delivered by the Head of Delegation to mark World Press Freedom Day was widely cited in the media. Following the elections, a joint local statement was released by the EU and like-minded partners drawing attention to the consequences of the new Cybercrime Act, as manifested by human rights infringements against domestic observers. Towards the end of the year, a forum with media stakeholders was organised to discuss the roles and responsibilities of the media in society and political life.

The EU continued to show keen interest in land disputes in Tanzania, particularly where the livelihoods and acquired customary rights of pastoralist communities were affected. A European Parliament resolution in March condemned the violation of the basic human rights of local rural communities, their illegal displacement and the destruction of their homes and traditional way of life. It also called on the authorities to enact and implement effective land policies and provide adequate and timely dispute settlement mechanisms.

Two EU-funded projects focusing on harmful traditional practices were launched in early 2015. One project focused on child marriage and female genital mutilation, the other on older women's rights in the context of attacks following witchcraft allegations. The implementation of a comprehensive portfolio of EU-funded actions on children's rights and women's empowerment in Tanzania continued in 2015.

On the occasion of International Albinism Awareness Day in June, the EU Delegation issued a press release confirming its deep concern over the discrimination and violence suffered by persons with albinism and underlining the need to educate people and explain that the myths surrounding albinism were false and misleading but also a breach of human rights, against the law and, more broadly, against the concept of humanity.

As part of EU advocacy efforts against capital punishment, for the World Day against the Death Penalty in October EU Heads of Mission visited a prison, including inmates on death row, and exchanged views with government and human rights stakeholders, welcoming the continued moratorium on the death penalty in Tanzania and promoting its abolition.

Finally, on Human Rights Day in December, the EU Delegation published a message in two major daily newspapers in both English and Kiswahili, on the importance of Tanzanians enjoying their rights and freedoms.

Togo

Three main elements can be highlighted regarding the situation of human rights in Togo in 2015. First of all, the presidential elections in April 2015 took place without any violent incidents or problems related to human rights. Secondly, a new Penal Code was adopted, with various provisions representing advances in areas such as the criminalisation of torture, illegal trafficking of migrants, human trafficking of all persons (not just children), the regulation of discrimination against women and AIDS patients, and female genital mutilation. Thirdly, impunity, excessive use of force and lack of trust in the police and the judiciary remained major challenges; this was evident from the fact that the security forces killed more than a dozen people during demonstrations.

In general, the pace of reforms and their implementation have been slow in bringing about real improvements in the living conditions of Togolese citizens. Poor prison conditions and abuse of preventive detention remained a problem.

EU action in the field of human rights in Togo in 2015 comprised regular dialogue with the authorities, leaders and civil society organisations, as well as public diplomacy and technical and financial assistance. Actions focused on strengthening civil society and supporting national reconciliation efforts, reform of the justice and security sectors and preventing electoral conflicts. The human rights situation in Togo was raised in the EU's regular political dialogue, including the formal political dialogue session in November 2015.

The EU continued to work during 2015 to implement the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations and to support civil society and strengthen local authorities, especially through the Pascrena project to support civil society and national reconciliation (*Projet d'appui à la société civile et à la réconciliation nationale*) under the EIDHR. In the last months of 2015, the EU made headway with preparation of a new programme dedicated to state consolidation and launched a programme to support modernisation of the justice sector. Work is also ongoing to strengthen the security forces' capabilities and to make their working methods more professional and more compatible with human rights; a project to set up a new police college will also receive support.

Uganda

In the run-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections due to take place in 2016, the EU continued to urge the Ugandan authorities to implement the recommendations of the 2011 EU election observation mission (EOM). The EU regretted that the Constitutional (Amendment) Act 2015, which was originally expected to implement significant reforms to the electoral system, did not take into account constructive recommendations from the Inter-Party Organisation for Dialogue, which brought together all Ugandan political parties holding at least one parliamentary seat, or from the EOM. The EU decided to deploy an EOM to the 2016 elections.

Freedom of association and of assembly remained of concern in 2015. The EU was concerned that the first draft of the Non-Governmental Organisations Bill before parliament would have granted regulatory bodies extensive powers of control over the activities of civil society. The EU raised its concerns intensively with the Ugandan authorities, and made written submissions to the Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs, which was responsible for scrutinising the bill. Amendments introduced by the committee removed some of the most restrictive provisions, but nevertheless the act adopted imposes vague and broad obligations on NGOs that could impede their activities. The EU will follow implementation of the act carefully including the formulation of regulations to operationalise the Act.

The Public Order Management Act 2013 was used as a basis to prevent a number of political meetings organised by opposition parties from taking place. Controversy centred on whether the correct interpretation of the act always required the organisers of political meetings to obtain the permission of the police before holding a meeting. The EU encouraged the police and opposition parties to reach a common interpretation of the act that would facilitate peaceful political assemblies.

The EU discussed human rights with President Museveni during its Article 8 dialogue on 24 April 2015. The discussion covered the electoral process, freedom of association, gender equality, police accountability and the fight against torture.

The adoption of the Prevention and Prohibition of Torture Act in 2012 created a comprehensive legal framework for the prevention of torture in Uganda. The EU continued to support implementation of this law, for example by publicising its content through translation into local languages. The EU also provided support for the African Centre for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims, and for the Ugandan Human Rights Commission to investigate allegations of torture. The EU urged the Ugandan authorities to ratify the UN Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture at the earliest possible opportunity.

While welcoming the continuation of the de facto moratorium on the death penalty, the EU continued to urge the Ugandan authorities to abolish the death penalty in law.

The EU worked with local civil society partners to promote the rights of women and children. In particular, it helped the Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association to hold a women's parliament session in July 2015, supported a joint project involving civil society and the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development against gender-based violence and participated in the National Forum on the State of the Ugandan Child.

The EU continued to support the work of the Ugandan Human Rights Commission; for example, the EU helped the UHRC and the Equal Opportunities Commission to monitor access to health services across Uganda, as well as working conditions in industry, mines and fishing communities. The EU expressed concern that, as of April 2015, the UHRC was reduced to only two commissioners and was without a chairperson, and urged the appointment of replacements.

In January 2015, the EU welcomed the surrender of Dominic Ongwen, an alleged brigade commander of the Lord's Resistance Army, and his transfer to the International Criminal Court to face trial on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The annual EU Human Rights Defender Award for Uganda was awarded in 2015 to Dr Livingstone Sewanyana, founder and Executive Director of the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative.

Zambia

The presidential by-elections in January 2015 were considered largely free and democratic. Even though government-critical media continues to exist, the August 2016 general elections and the resulting limited term of the new Patriotic Front (PF) government have, however, already impacted freedom of the press and freedom of expression. The Information and Broadcasting Minister regularly issues public threats against media outlets, leading to self-censorship among state (and some of the private) media. In 2015, the leading independent newspaper The Post saw journalists arrested and intimidated while the Zambia Revenue Authority attempted to close it down entirely due to tax obligations. Community radios were threatened by PF cadres for featuring opposition representatives on their programmes. Singer Pilato was detained and prosecuted for publishing a song mocking the president, but later released.

The EU and its Member States are concerned that violations of political and civil rights could increase in the run-up to the 2016 elections. Corruption and political violence continue to be an issue in Zambia (e.g. ex-politicians receiving early pardons from prison sentences, violent party cadres interfering in parliamentary by-elections, opposition leaders attacked and detained/arrested for short periods under the Public Order Act), even though comparatively speaking these areas are of less concern than in other countries in the region. The transition to e-governance in Zambia was interpreted as a positive step in the fight against corruption and towards greater transparency.

Political support for women's and children's rights, including against child, early and forced marriage, exists on paper, from both high-level government representatives and traditional leaders, but the politically motivated presidential pardon for PF-friendly singer General Kanene, who was serving a sentence for defilement of a minor, and his subsequent appointment as Zambia's GBV ambassador, show the limitations of this commitment. Gender-based violence incidents are on the rise, possibly as a result of increased reporting. The dramatic deterioration in the economic climate in 2015 could lead to an even more hostile environment for vulnerable women and children, especially in poor communities.

The presidential pardon commuting the death sentences of more than 330 prisoners to life imprisonment was welcomed by the EU. There have been no executions in Zambia since 1997 under a de facto moratorium. However, conditions in the country's overcrowded prisons remain very poor, especially for women, accompanying children and other vulnerable groups. On the positive side, there seems to be growing political support for moving from a strictly punitive towards a correctional approach in the Zambian prison system.

The recognition of LGBTI rights is still an issue in Zambia, as demonstrated by the conviction of a transgender woman who now faces up to 15 years in prison and a continuing series of anti-LGBTI columns in one of the state newspapers. However, on the positive side, the Zambian High Court upheld the acquittal of LGBTI activist Paul Kasonkomona and his right to freedom of expression, while in three LGBTI cases men accused of having sex with men were acquitted by the lower courts in the course of one year.

Zimbabwe

The human rights situation in Zimbabwe remains stable but fragile. Although the frequency of serious human rights violations remained relatively low when compared to the peak period of violence at the time of the 2008 elections, there were still some worrying incidents.

Lack of progress by the Zimbabwean authorities in the case of the abduction of the human rights activist, Itai Dzamara, remains a serious concern. Itai Dzamara, a pro-democracy activist, was abducted by unidentified men in March 2015. The High Court issued an order compelling the Home Affairs Minister and the Commissioner-General of Police to do everything necessary to find the missing activist and to work closely with his lawyers. So far, his whereabouts and condition remain unknown. The European Parliament expressed its concern on 19 May 2015 and the EU Delegation issued local statements on 11 March, 9 April, 9 May, 9 June, 7 July, 7 August and 9 September 2015 and continues to support civil society demands for clarity on the case through social media.

Following a series of incidents of inter- and intra-party violence, on 17 November the EU issued a local statement expressing its concern and encouraging all parties to respect democratic principles. Throughout 2015, the electoral environment around by-elections was mostly free from violence. However, on 10 June, Hurungwe West experienced incidents of intimidation and political violence in the run-up to and immediate aftermath of the vote.

Repressive legislation (Public Order and Security Act, Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act) remain in place. A crackdown on unlicensed vendors operating at undesignated sites in Harare and other cities escalated over the summer. Police were criticised by civil society for the use of excessive force. There are, nevertheless, indications that the constitutional provision requiring detainees to be released within 48 hours if no charges are brought is broadly being adhered to in the case of human rights defenders.

Since the adoption of the new progressive constitution in 2013, 10 acts have been brought into line with the constitution. Three major bills are at various stages in parliament (including the General Laws Amendment Bill, which will change the Electoral Act). The Gender Commission Bill awaits presidential assent. Twenty-two bills are being drafted by the interministerial taskforce chaired by the Ministry of Justice (with support from the EUD).

Concerns around the rule of law persist, including continued land seizures and the handling of informal urban settlers and internally displaced persons.

Overall, and despite these concerns, there are some encouraging areas of progress in the human rights environment. The judiciary is showing some signs of independence, including in some high-profile land invasions, even though court decisions are not always enforced. There has been movement towards the operationalisation of the independent constitutional commissions. In June, President Mugabe appointed members of the Gender Commission and in December members of the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission. The Human Rights Commission is becoming increasingly operational. However, these key commissions still require greater independence and resources.

The space in which civil society is able to operate remains relatively open. Government is working increasingly closely with some CSOs, including at the local government level around social and economic rights. Throughout the year CSOs were able to observe by-elections unhindered.

Although limited in circulation (mostly to urban areas) the private print media in Zimbabwe remain broadly free and journalists are, for the most part, able to criticise government. However, investigative journalism to unearth corruption remains difficult. Freedom of the airwaves, particularly in rural areas, where it is the main source of information, is limited by the state. Access to social media is growing and so far unimpeded.

For 10 years there has been a de facto moratorium on carrying out the death penalty. No death warrants were signed for execution in 2015.

VI. Arabian Peninsula

Bahrain

Four years after the resurgence of unrest in the Kingdom of Bahrain, in 2015 the EU continued to monitor local developments closely and where appropriate, via different channels, to express concern regarding the internal human rights situation, welcome positive reforms and to offer support to enhance the effective protection of human rights.

The EU consistently called upon all sides to engage constructively in a process of genuine national reconciliation and dialogue, without preconditions and in a peaceful manner. The EU welcomed some of the initiatives undertaken by the government of Bahrain – including the implementation of the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry – and closely followed the work of newly created institutions such as the police ombudsman for the Ministry of the Interior, the National Institution for Human Rights, the Special Investigation Unit and the Prisoners and Detainees Rights Commission. The conditions needed for real and lasting reconciliation have not yet been achieved and continue to require further work. The EU repeatedly called on all Bahrainis to make use of the new institutions to make sure they can deliver genuine improvements in the human rights situation in Bahrain, including on the basis of the robust recommendations made in the reports presented by the NIHR and the ombudsman.

The EU consistently engaged with the Bahraini authorities on human rights concerns in the kingdom, while encouraging ongoing reform measures. The EU conducted several formal and informal outreach initiatives towards the Bahraini authorities concerning a number of arrests of prominent individuals for criticising the Bahraini or Saudi governments. The EU expressed concern regarding freedom of the press and freedom of expression in the context of the temporary suspension of publication of *Al Wasat*, a leading newspaper, which was swiftly reversed.

In addition to a series of public statements, the HR/VP and EEAS officials had regular direct contacts with Bahraini political actors and activists. The EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Lambrinidis, visited Bahrain for the second time in May 2015 and held a wide range of consultations with the authorities, opposition political societies, national human rights bodies and civil society actors, largely focusing on national reconciliation and the human rights situation. During this visit, he reiterated the EU's offer to support the implementation of Bahrain's international commitments and the UPR recommendations, focusing in particular on issues of accountability and ill-treatment in detention.

The EU continued to encourage all political societies to engage in a national dialogue aimed at reform and national reconciliation and to unequivocally reject violence, while calling on the authorities to reach out to the opposition and to consider confidence-building measures, including the release of peaceful activists.

Nineteen EU Member States supported a joint statement on the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) and the human rights situation in Bahrain under item 2 in Geneva on 14 September.

Kuwait

The main issues that the EU raised with the Kuwaiti authorities during 2015 were the situation of the *bidoons* (stateless residents), the death penalty, freedom of expression and the situation of foreign labourers and domestic workers.

The EU welcomed the adoption of two laws regulating the labour rights of domestic workers. Under the new legislation, domestic workers' rights and obligations are clearly defined. The new laws introduce some positive changes and the EU will continue to monitor their implementation and their enforcement mechanisms.

In its contacts with the Kuwaiti authorities the EU expressed its concern at a number of arrests of human rights activists for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. The EU also reiterated its opposition to the death penalty in all cases and in all circumstances, calling on Kuwait to return to a de facto moratorium on the use of capital punishment.

A number of EU Member States participated in the review of Kuwait by the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Working Group of the UN Human Rights Council in January 2015. The EU encourages the Kuwaiti authorities to implement the UPR recommendations and will continue to monitor the process.

The EU is closely monitoring the status of stateless persons in Kuwait since no final solution to this issue has as yet been found.

The EU also raised the question of migrant workers' rights, especially the right to education in state schools.

Oman

Overall, Oman has some of the highest human rights standards in the region and takes pride in being a peaceful and relatively tolerant country, but some concerns remain about human rights, particularly freedom of expression.

The EU was concerned about several court cases brought against activists who protested or expressed views on social media, but it also noted that pardons were granted in most of these cases. The EU closely monitored a number of individual cases, including those of Ismaeel al-Meqbali, Helal al-Alawi, Saeed Jadad and Hassan al-Basham.

The EU welcomed the visit in September 2014 of Maina Kiai, UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of peaceful assembly and association. In his visit report to the UN Human Rights Council, Mr Kiai stated that the right of Oman to peaceful assembly is 'virtually non-existent in practice' and made recommendations to Oman on the rights to freedom of assembly and association.

Another issue of concern for the EU was discrimination against expatriate workers in the application of the labour laws and in practice, and the general status and situation of these workers. The EU liaised with the Omani authorities on the situation of foreign workers and on human trafficking. There was also insufficient protection for victims of domestic violence and bias against women.

Qatar

The EU and its Member States focused particularly on freedom of expression and the development of independent media, efforts to strengthen civil society via more liberal legislation on freedom of association and civil society initiatives, support for human rights defenders, women's rights, and improving the working and living conditions of migrant workers.

EU attention focused on the conditions of migrant workers in Qatar, following reports of unpaid wages, shortcomings in the areas of health and safety, inadequate housing, and unscrupulous employment agencies in the workers' countries of origin in the run-up to the FIFA World Cup 2022. The EU welcomed a new law which was introduced at the end of October, to be implemented by December 2016, as an important step in this area, while encouraging the Qatari authorities to reform the *kafala* (sponsorship) system further and replace it with a contract-based system.

Qatar is also facing a complaint under Article 26 of the ILO Constitution for violation of ILO Convention 81 on Labour Inspection and Convention 29 on Forced Labour, filed against the state at the ILO. A tripartite discussion took place on 12 November at a meeting of the ILO Governing Board, during which Qatar reiterated its openness to engaging with international bodies and the ILO, in particular to improve the rights of migrants. The EU, in its common statement, called on Qatar to cooperate closely with ILO.

Saudi Arabia

The EU engaged with the Saudi authorities on human rights concerns in the kingdom, while encouraging reform measures. The areas of main concern included the male guardianship system and women's rights, the death penalty, reform of the judiciary, freedom of expression, religious tolerance, discrimination and foreign labourers' rights.

In addition to a series of public statements, the EU conducted several formal and informal outreach initiatives towards the Saudi authorities in several human rights-related court cases in close coordination with EU Member States and like-minded partners, in particular expressing concern regarding the cases of a number of activists such as Raif Badawi and Ali al-Nimr. The European Parliament called for the immediate and unconditional release of Raif Badawi in its February 2015 urgency resolution. The resolution strongly condemned his public flogging by the Saudi authorities and called for his conviction and sentence, including his travel ban, to be quashed. The European Parliament also awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to Raif Badawi. On 18 December, his wife, Ensaf Haidar, accepted it on behalf of her husband, who remained in prison.

In December, the European Union Delegation, in close cooperation with embassies of European Union Member States, awarded the Chaillot Prize for the Promotion of Human Rights in the GCC region in 2015 jointly to the Baladi Initiative and the Thulatha Cultural Forum. A special Chaillot Prize for lifetime achievements was awarded to Ibrahim al-Mugaiteeb to acknowledge and further encourage his efforts and work for the promotion and protection of human rights in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The EU maintained regular contacts with civil society organisations and human rights defenders and raised cases of concern with the relevant authorities on several occasions. Since 2013, the EU Delegation has obtained permission for diplomats to attend public trials (Saudi Arabia adopted an NGO Law in December 2015).

The EU, through the European Union Delegation, presented the EU priorities and initiatives to Saudi authorities ahead of each Human Rights Council and UNGA Third Committee meeting.

The European Parliament paid a visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in February in the framework of the inter-parliamentary meeting between the European Parliament and the Majlis Ash-Shura.

The European Parliament passed a resolution on 8 October urging Saudi Arabia to halt the execution of Ali Mohammed al-Nimr and calling for a moratorium on the death penalty.

The European Union Delegation organised a Panel Discussion on Violence against Women and Children in Saudi Arabia in close collaboration with some of the embassies of European Member States and Saudi authorities on 10 December 2015. The event was part of the EU's diplomatic outreach with a global focus on all forms of violence against children and women.

On 12 December, the EU welcomed the municipal elections in Saudi Arabia in which both men and women could vote and be elected for the first time, marking an important milestone for women's empowerment in the country.

The EU shares some of the UN human rights experts' concerns at overly broad counter-terrorism measures which could lead to abuse of non-terrorist-related human rights and online political activists.

United Arab Emirates

The EU, in close coordination with EU Member State embassies, remained active in monitoring the human rights situation in the United Arab Emirates.

The United Arab Emirates was re-elected to the Human Rights Council in Geneva in October 2015. The EU paid particular attention to the voluntary pledges and commitments made by the UAE for the period 2016-2018.

The fourth and fifth meetings of the EU- United Arab Emirates bilateral technical working group on human rights were held in May and November respectively. The meetings addressed the full range of EU concerns, including the death penalty, freedom of expression, enforced disappearances, migration and employment issues, and domestic violence.

The United Arab Emirates abstained on the vote on the UN resolution on a moratorium on the use of the death penalty at the 69th session of UN General Assembly. The United Arab Emirates applies the UN ECOSOC minimum standards and rarely carries out death sentences. However, in July 2015, an Emirati woman was executed for the murder of an American/Romanian woman in a shopping mall. There is no official confirmation that this execution will pave the way for overall resumption of the implementation of the death penalty in the country. In January 2014 President Khalifa halted all imminent executions in murder cases in order to find a solution in conformity with the sharia (blood money), which could be interpreted as a de facto moratorium on the death penalty.

In cooperation with countries of origin, the United Arab Emirates showed commitment to trying to limit abuses in the recruitment of migrant workers. The key is to guarantee the right of workers to choose their employers. A new decree regulating labour relations was announced by the United Arab Emirates Minister for Labour on 29 September 2015 and is due to enter into force on 1 January 2016. Undeniably, these provisions would constitute progress for the protection of migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates. In practical terms, they notably aim to prevent the original job offer being replaced by a different final labour contract less favourable for the worker, as well as to allow workers to change employer in the United Arab Emirates without being obliged to go back to their country of origin.

The United Arab Emirates authorities continued to maintain strict limitations on both freedom of expression and association, especially in cases where the United Arab Emirates government was criticised and democratic reforms were called for. The 2012 United Arab Emirates Cybercrime Act, stating that 'any form of misuse of a computer/smart device or an electronic network/system could lead to a sentence of up to life and/or a fine varying between AED 50 000 and AED 3 million', was invoked several times during the year.

The Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders of 2015 was given to Emirati Ahmed Mansour. Owing to a travel ban imposed by the United Arab Emirates government he was unable to attend the award ceremony in Geneva.

Cases of alleged enforced disappearance were highlighted throughout the year, including that of Dr Nasser Bin Ghaith, an Emirati economist and academic, who was reportedly arrested and taken to an unknown location on 18 August and held incommunicado for almost eight months.

The third Federal National Council (FNC) election was held on 3 October with an electoral college double the size of that in the 2011 elections and an increased turnout, a sign of the Emirati people's growing interest in the process. For the first time in the Gulf, a woman, Amal al-Qubaisi, was appointed leader of the National Assembly.

Yemen

Human rights and democracy were at the forefront of EU engagement in Yemen. The National Dialogue Conference and its outcomes, which fed into the constitutional drafting process, appeared to be steering Yemen towards a new course on human rights and the democratic process, fully in keeping with international law.

However, in early 2015 Yemen's initially promising transition was derailed by a combination of factors following the take-over of Sanaa and large parts of the country by allied Houthi/Saleh forces in September 2014, a growing power vacuum and complex governance challenges. Since March 2015 a Saudi Arabian led military Coalition intervened in Yemen in response to a request of the President Hadi, with the objective to return Yemen's legitimate government to power and roll back the Houthi /Saleh-loyalist forces while, in parallel, peace efforts under the auspices of the UN are ongoing. Yemen's conflict risks becoming a protracted and prolonged war which could lead to further state disintegration, territorial fragmentation and sectarian violence – all of which is likely to deprive its citizens of a number of basic human rights.

Currently, many of Yemen's institutions based in Sana'a continue to operate but are no longer under full legitimate government control, making international engagement on human rights issues very difficult, while Yemen's south is also a very difficult operating environment. In this situation, Yemenis' most basic human rights, including the right to life, are challenged primarily by the conflict itself. The conflict also hampers the work of humanitarian organisations and human rights defenders. The UN and human rights organisations have denounced frequent violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by all sides in the conflict.

The grim humanitarian situation, notably lack of food security and essential social services, is likely to have an impact beyond the current generation. Moreover, the level of destruction is such that Yemen's path towards economic growth and development will remain a significant challenge as the population grows at a rate of 3.1 %, with some 70 % of the population under 35.

The EU Delegation supports the efforts of the UN Special Envoy and his team to return Yemen to the political track and end the armed conflict. The EU has also called on all parties to adhere to human rights principles and international law. Statements by HR/VP Mogherini and Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, Stylianides, have addressed, inter alia, the targeting of civilians and humanitarian access. The EU Delegation has also engaged with the Houthi/pro-Saleh actors to lobby them to reverse their action in contravention of democratic principles, international human rights and humanitarian law (release of political prisoners, protection of journalists, etc.) while also addressing issues related to freedom of religion or belief. However, human rights violations continue including detention of journalists and targeted attacks on civilians areas.

At the 30th session of the Human Rights Council, the EU supported the Netherlands' efforts to secure a draft resolution on Yemen under item 10 (technical cooperation). This proposed resolution focused on an independent and impartial mechanism to investigate human rights violations in the current conflict in keeping with the OHCHR's report on this matter. However, a joint resolution tabled by Yemen's government and Saudi Arabia was adopted by the UN Human Rights Council on 2 October 2015 on 'technical assistance and capacity building for Yemen in the field of human rights' which sets the conditions for a national commission of inquiry which the EU expects to work independently. The EU expressed concern for the deterioration of the human rights situation in Yemen and called for legitimate authorities to ensure the alleged violation did not go unpunished. The EU reiterated its support for the High Commissioner's oral update at the Council's 31st session; a comprehensive written report is expected at the HRC's 33rd session.

The EU continues to encourage Yemen to accede to the Arms Trade Treaty as Yemen's excessive armament over decades under the rule of former President Saleh has not only diverted public funds in one of the least developed Arab nations but also continues to fuel the current conflict. In this vein, Yemen will need to engage in sweeping security sector reform to change its future path of development and with it improve the economic and social rights of its citizens. The EU will continue to seek to play a role in assisting with the civilian side of security sector reform. A project planned in 2015 under the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) was to address police reform through the establishment of a pilot police station in Sana'a showcasing a human rights-based approach to local policing. The blueprint for this and related projects remains valid for the time when the conflict subsides.

In parallel, the EU continued its support for many Yemeni civil society organisations, which despite great obstacles continue working in the field of human rights and mediation in order to protect Yemen's fragile social fabric. A project was launched with UNICEF on the protection of children in armed conflict in December 2015. Direct assistance to human rights defenders in need continued throughout 2015, through various EU support mechanisms. Despite a number of projects being suspended and the scaling down of core activities, some Yemeni civil society organisations actively monitored human rights violations in selected areas (e.g. civilian casualties, forced disappearances or damage assessment) or worked on enhancing legal security, arrest procedures and detention conditions, including those of women and girls.

Under the IcSP, the EU assisted with the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM) to facilitate the unimpeded flow of commercial items into Yemen – a country almost exclusively dependent on imports of basic goods and food. The UNVIM aims to ensure that commercial cargo and humanitarian aid entering the country's territorial waters are in compliance with UNSCR 2216. In the context of the EU's ongoing support for civilian security sector reform the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) also received IcSP funding to prepare future projects in this sector. Furthermore, an IcSP-funded call for proposals on 'support to in-country civil society actors in conflict prevention, peace-building and crisis preparedness in Yemen' resulted in allocations to projects on 'local peace-building' and 'women and children in situations of armed conflict'.

Finally, the EU Delegation focused its advocacy efforts and public diplomacy on women's empowerment and the prevailing practice of early marriage in Yemen, through the screening of a prize-winning film 'I am Nojoom, Age 10 and Divorced' and an associated photo exhibition promoting Yemeni female photographers. The film drew audiences of close to 1 000 in Paris and Brussels, with follow-up events in Brussels (the '*Elles tournent*' festival) and New York planned for early 2016, linking the conditions in Yemen to worldwide campaigns.

Iran

Despite the pledges made by President Rouhani that civil liberties would improve under his government, little progress was achieved in 2015. Problems persisted, notably an increasing number of executions, lack of guarantees of a free and fair trial, and violations of freedom of expression, religion and belief and of women's rights.

EU contacts with Iran in 2015 remained focused on the solution to the nuclear issue. However, the EU continued to address concerns on human rights in Iran using a variety of formal and informal, bilateral and multilateral avenues. The EU issued statements on several individual cases such as the imminent executions of juvenile offenders and reiterated its concerns about the high number of executions in Iran, notably for crimes such as drug offences which do not qualify as 'most serious crimes' under international human rights law. The EU also called upon the Iranian government to refrain from using the death penalty.

With 765 executions reported to have taken place in 2015 (482 executions were reported in 2014 and 500 in 2013 according to available data) the application of the death penalty was a major human rights issue.

During her first visit to Tehran on 28 July 2015, the EU HR/VP Mogherini urged the need to improve the human rights situation.

The European Parliament continued to take a keen interest in the human rights situation in Iran. A delegation from the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament (AFET) led by Elmar Brok visited Iran in June 2015 and the European Parliament President Schulz visited in October 2015.

Iran underwent its second Universal Periodic Review (UPR) during the 28th session of the Human Rights Council in March 2015. The EU participated in the process and welcomed Iran's acceptance of 130 (out of 291) recommendations. During the United Nations General Assembly in New York, the EU again supported a resolution, tabled by Canada, denouncing the human rights situation in Iran.

The ILO supervisory mechanisms considered breaches of Iran with freedom of association, highlighting serious and urgent cases in this regard.

Iraq

Iraq is struggling with a critical human rights situation against the background of the massive abuses committed by Da'esh, increased sectarian violence and the difficult situation faced by ethnic and religious minorities. The country faces a humanitarian emergency, with 3.2 million internally displaced persons and 8.7 million Iraqis in need of assistance.

Throughout the year, the EU continued to push for a political solution to the conflict in Iraq, tackling its root causes. The EU supported Prime Minister al-Abadi in the implementation of his reform programme addressing widespread corruption and deficient public services. It called on the government to reach out to all components of Iraqi society and to make progress on national reconciliation.

On 16 March 2015, the Foreign Affairs Council adopted the EU Regional Strategy on Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat, which aims to achieve lasting peace, stability and security in the region. It guides EU and Member State actions on the ground, including in areas relevant to human rights, e.g. the rule of law, political inclusiveness, local governance, the fight against corruption, reform of the judiciary as well as support for the delivery of basic services and economic development. In their 14 December 2015 Council conclusions, the Foreign Affairs Ministers strongly condemned the continued gross, systematic and widespread human rights abuses carried out by Da'esh and called for the perpetrators to be held accountable. It also made clear that the fight against Da'esh must remain human rights-compliant.

Within the framework of the EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), signed in May 2012, the Sub-committee on Human Rights and Democracy met for the second time in Baghdad in April 2015, to discuss the human trafficking of Yezidi women and children, the use of torture and forced confessions, and freedom of the media. Areas of progress relating to the monitoring of prisons and the Iraqi police's ability to deal with cases of domestic violence, not least through the employment of female police officers, were highlighted.

The European Parliament adopted several resolutions, condemning Da'esh's action and raising concerns about the humanitarian situation as well as rights of persons belonging to minorities in Iraq. The sixth European Parliament and Iraq inter-parliamentary meeting took place in Brussels in December 2015.

At the local level, the EU Delegation in Iraq chaired and organised monthly meetings of the EU+ Human Rights Working Group (EU Member States plus like-minded countries and the UN), a platform for regular outreach and dialogue with Iraqi government officials, parliamentarians, political actors, NGOs and CSOs. In February 2015, the EU Delegation and EU Member State embassies issued a statement on the implementation of UNSC resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. In November 2015 local outreach to the political parties in Kurdistan was conducted in reaction to the political impasse in the region and popular demonstrations. Several actions were undertaken on torture, including vis-à-vis the police, and on the death penalty, including Head of Delegation outreach to the President of the Republic. In 2015, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq executed three people, thus ending the 2008 de facto moratorium on the death penalty. According to sources of the federal government, 37/38 people were sentenced to death in 2015.

In November 2015, the EU Delegation conducted outreach with regard to a controversial article of the National Identity Card Law which violates the freedom of religion or belief of non-Muslim groups. Furthermore, the EU renewed its call for Iraq to sign the Statute of the International Criminal Court, the Optional Protocols to CAT and CEDAW as well as the Second Optional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions. The EU Delegation contributed to the formulation of EU interventions at the Universal Periodic Review Working Group on Iraq.

Iraq benefits from several EU-funded projects related to human rights, the rule of law, education and support for local authorities. Approximately 15 % of Iraq's Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2014-2017 is dedicated to human rights-specific projects. Ongoing projects provide support for the criminal justice sector, assist capacity building at the Independent High Commission for Human Rights and aim to strengthen the resilience of regional and local governance. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) is currently funding the training of CSOs, teachers and university professors to deliver workshops on human rights, religious tolerance, anti-discrimination and gender empowerment.

The EU supported humanitarian partners in Iraq with EUR 104.65 million in 2015, targeting its needs-based assistance on difficult-to-reach areas. Humanitarian diplomacy was conducted with a view to denouncing widespread violations of IHL by all parties to the conflict. In this context, the European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection, Stylianides, visited Iraq twice.

VII. ASIA

Afghanistan

In 2015 the EU engaged with the Afghan government, parliament, civil society and the international community as well as Member States with the aim of increasing respect for and awareness of human rights. Key areas of concern continued to be women's and children's rights, civil society and human rights defenders, torture and abuse, freedom of expression, religion and/or belief, the death penalty and access to justice.

The first Afghanistan-EU local human rights dialogue was held on 15 June 2015 with a focus on issues of women's rights, children's rights, torture and ill-treatment, access to justice, freedom of expression and socially vulnerable persons and/or persons with disabilities. A follow-up meeting with the government was held on 1 December 2015.

The EU continued to support the strengthening of international, regional and national frameworks for the protection and promotion of human rights in Afghanistan. The EU maintained its leading role in the policy dialogue including around the Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework (SMAF). The SMAF was agreed in September 2015 and focuses on key reforms in areas such as governance, the rule of law and human rights, including women's rights, the elimination of violence against women (EVAW) and the implementation of UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security. Children's rights were also high on the policy dialogue agenda.

The EU continued advocating the appointment of an Attorney General by the end of 2015 and justice sector reform by the end of 2016. The EU also advocated the appointment of a female judge to the Supreme Court; however, the female nominee was rejected by the parliament.

The EU emphasised the need for the Afghan government to demonstrate political commitment to and support for the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).

To promote implementation of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325), which the government launched on 30 June 2015, the EU and the Finnish Embassy held a conference on the implementation of NAP 1325 together with the Afghan government on 20 September 2015.

In 2015, the EU issued several public statements in response to major human rights violations. The EU frequently expressed concern regarding the high number of civilian casualties as a result of terrorist attacks, armed conflict and the fragile security situation. In March the EU issued a press statement condemning the brutal killing of a young woman in Kabul by an angry mob. Five women were stoned to death in Taliban-controlled areas in 2015 and the EU issued statements of condemnation.

The EU continued throughout the year to support public events that promoted human rights and women's rights, including by sponsoring and promoting debates, public presentations, events and speeches.

After direct threats to journalists from the Taliban the EU established a bi-monthly meeting with journalists regarding freedom of the media and security for journalists.

The EU continued to be a key donor in Afghanistan, championing human rights through its different instruments and thematic programmes. The EU Delegation implemented 23 contracts in support of civil society, human rights, women's empowerment the media and social protection. The projects were designed to support the role of civil society in promoting human rights and democratic reform; create a more enabling environment for Afghan women to participate in public life; strengthen political participation and rights protection for marginalised internally displaced persons (IDPs) in urban environments; develop youth leaders' knowledge of civic, gender and human rights issues; support human rights defenders; mitigate and prevent family violence against women and girls and provide political support, access to vocational training, capacity building and psychosocial counselling.

In 2015, the EU awarded two new grants under the EIDHR CBSS focusing on human rights monitoring and reporting, capacity building in the media, including investigative journalism, and the promotion of women's political and civil empowerment and women's rights, through engagement with religious leaders and mullahs. The EU also provided an emergency grant, under the EIDHR, to support human rights and women's rights activists evacuated from Kunduz following the Taliban's capture of the city.

EUPOL is working closely with the Ministry of the Interior and supporting it with strategic advice on its tasks and responsibilities, with a special focus on plans for implementation of the female police strategy. In particular, it is planned to establish a committee to monitor harassment and sexual abuse of female police officers in the ANP and a separate commission to report and monitor the ANP's performance and human rights violations committed by ANP staff. EUPOL advised the gender unit at the Attorney General's Office (AGO), focusing on capacity building in the field of human rights and gender. EUPOL supported the discussion between the MoI and AIHRC/Office of the Police Ombudsman on their Memorandum of Understanding. EUPOL also participated in the Criminal Law Reform Working Group, which is drafting the Penal Code.

The negotiations for a Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development with the Afghan government were successfully concluded and the CAPD was initialled on 1 July 2015.

ASEAN

Following the adoption by the ASEAN Heads of State or Government of an ASEAN Human Rights Declaration in 2012, the work of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), the main ASEAN human rights' body, has been stepped up. Based on the Bandar Seri Begawan 2013-2017 Plan of Action to Strengthen the ASEAN-EU Enhanced Partnership, the EU-ASEAN dialogue and cooperation on human rights improved substantially.

The EU invited members of the AICHR, the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), the ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW), the ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of Migrant Workers (ACMW) and the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC) to Brussels for a week-long visit in October. During this visit, the EU and ASEAN held their first ever policy dialogue on human rights, co-chaired by the EUSR for Human Rights, Stavros Lambrinidis. On the EU side, the objective was to strengthen mutual trust and set a course towards regular human rights dialogues and enhanced bilateral and multilateral cooperation, while encouraging ASEAN human rights bodies to engage more openly with civil society and develop the protection side of their mandates. The discussions also made for constructive policy exchanges on topics such as CSR and human rights, and women's and children's rights. In addition to the formal dialogue, the EUSR led a half-day workshop on cooperation with civil society. The AICHR also had the opportunity to meet with the European Parliament, EU NGOs and business representatives to discuss CSR. Some field visits and a full day of meetings with Belgian authorities completed the programme.

Bangladesh

The main EU priorities in the area of human rights and democracy remained judicial reform, a death penalty moratorium, implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, support for Rohingyas, the rights of persons belonging to minorities, human rights defenders, women's and children's rights, support for civil society and implementation of labour rights.

In 2015, Bangladesh witnessed a diminishing democratic space and a steady deterioration in civil and political rights, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and restrictive action against opposition and human rights activists. Intimidation of journalists and editors also increased, while measures were taken to undermine the economic viability of some prominent newspapers. Attacks on freedom of expression multiplied in 2015. The killings of four 'atheist' bloggers and one publisher in 2015 proved that the country was not immune to the threat of rising religious extremism. The deteriorating security situation was underlined by the killings of two foreign citizens. On the positive side, some progress was achieved on social and economic rights.

The EU continued its human rights and democracy dialogue with Bangladesh at the meetings of the Sub-group on Good Governance, Human Rights and Migration in February 2015 and the EU-Bangladesh Joint Commission in November 2015. The main issues discussed were the protection of fundamental democratic rights, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, restrictive action against opposition and human rights activists, the situation of minorities and indigenous people and violence against women and children.

The EU and its Member States regularly followed the human rights situation in Bangladesh through political dialogue, public diplomacy, development assistance and projects, engaging with Bangladeshi representatives, meeting human rights activists or organising field visits to get acquainted with the situation on the spot. The EU Heads of Mission issued several statements on incidents of violence. On 15 January 2015, the Heads of Mission also met with the Foreign Minister to express their regret at the political violence and the resultant casualties.

The EU strongly condemned the murders of bloggers in several statements and called on the authorities to undertake proper investigations in order to bring the perpetrators to justice. The European Parliament adopted a resolution on 26 November 2015 on freedom of expression in Bangladesh, condemning the attacks against secularist writers, bloggers, religious minorities and foreign aid workers and calling on the Bangladeshi authorities to bring an immediate end to all acts of violence, harassment, intimidation and censorship. On 29 September 2015 the HR/VP's spokesperson issued a statement condemning the killing of an Italian aid worker and calling for those responsible for the crime to be brought to justice.

As regards the death penalty Bangladesh continued executions and passing death sentences. On 9 April 2015, following the confirmation by the Bangladeshi Supreme Court of the death sentence in the case of Muhammad Kamaruzzaman, the HR/VP's spokesperson issued a statement condemning the death penalty. The lack of fairness and transparency of the proceedings of the Bangladeshi International Crimes Tribunal was criticised by legal experts and by the chair of the European Parliament Delegation for relations with the countries of South Asia.

In response to the poor performance of the Election Commission in three consecutive elections (most recently, the April 2015 city corporation elections in Dhaka and Chittagong were marred by many irregularities witnessed by EU 'watchers'), and pursuant to Article 1 of the 2001 Cooperation Agreement under which respect for human rights and democratic principles is an essential element, the EU decided together with other donors to terminate a programme supporting the Election Commission of Bangladesh.

Cooperation under the framework of the Sustainability Compact continued in 2015 with the aim of improving labour rights, occupational health and safety conditions in the garment industry in Bangladesh. The long-awaited implementing rules for the revised Bangladesh Labour Act were published in September 2015 and factory inspections in the ready-made garment sector continued at a steady pace. These issues were discussed at a conference entitled 'Remembering Rana Plaza: The road ahead' at the European Parliament in April 2015. At the 104th International Labour Conference, the EU contributed to the examination of compliance of Bangladesh with the ILO Freedom of Association Convention 87.

To advance implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord the EU financed two projects: the CHT Development Facility project, which received EUR 24 million, and a project to strengthen basic education in the CHT.

The EU continued its dialogue with civil society organisations and human rights defenders. Continuous support was provided to human rights NGOs through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights.

Around 35 projects were ongoing in 2015, addressing issues ranging from the rights of children, women and persons with disabilities, minorities and indigenous peoples' rights and labour rights to empowering civil society, at a total cost of EUR 210 million. Seven new projects focusing on civil society were selected in 2015 to receive EUR 6.8 million. The strengthening of democratic governance is also one of the priorities of the Multiannual Indicative Programme for 2014-2020.

Bhutan

In 2015 the main EU priority on human rights and democracy remained support for the successful and continuing process of democratisation and modernisation, particularly the strengthening of civil and political rights, fostering a vibrant civil society and support for the Bhutanese government's efforts to fight violence against women and children. The EU continued to engage with Bhutan to solve the long-standing problem of Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees in Nepal.

Since the last Universal Periodic Review (in 2014) Bhutan has addressed a series of UPR recommendations, such as access to social services (e.g. health and education), poverty eradication, tackling domestic violence and gender issues, and fighting corruption. Bhutan has taken noteworthy steps, especially to combat corruption and safeguard women's and children's rights. Nevertheless the delays in the ratification of core international human rights instruments and a few restrictions on freedom of assembly and association need to be tackled.

In 2015, the EU engaged with the Bhutanese government on human rights issues in various formats, notably during the last (sixth) biennial consultations in Thimphu in November 2015 and meetings with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister. Issues were also raised during the first visit of PM Tobgay to Brussels in June 2015. The EU Heads of Mission visit to Bhutan in May 2015 provided an opportunity for wide-ranging discussion about the progress of democratisation with Bhutanese authorities and other stakeholders.

Under the Multiannual Indicative Programme (2014-2020) the EU focused its support on the strengthening of civil society and local government reform with the aim of consolidating the decentralisation process and the devolution of power and resources.

Brunei

Brunei Darussalam is an absolute monarchy, ruled under a state of emergency since 1963. A blend of village 'councils' and advisory bodies including a Legislative Council (LegCo) exercises a limited role in recommending and approving legislation. In an otherwise tolerant society, Brunei has adopted a conservative form of Islam which it is seeking to develop further under the Malay Islamic Monarchy concept.

Although the constitution theoretically protects religious freedom, in practice various restrictions are enforced. In 2015 the government continued its long-standing policies to promote the Sultanate's Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam (the official state religion). In December, there was international reporting on mosque sermons discouraging Muslims from being associated with Christian symbols, though worship is allowed for non-Muslims in Catholic and Anglican churches, for example. Within Islam itself, laws and policies place restrictions on religious groups that do not adhere to the Shafi'i school. A sharia penal code order published in October 2013 includes provisions that impact the legal structure governing religious freedom. Phase I (with punishments limited to fines and imprisonment) was introduced in May 2014. Few cases have been reported to the courts. In 2015 there was no indication of if or when further phases of the code would be introduced.

In September 2015, Brunei signed the UN Convention against Torture, but has not yet announced when it will ratify it.

The phased introduction of sharia criminal law may be seen as an attempt to enhance social as well as religious discipline and preserve Malay culture, traditions and customs rather than to punish or to contain rising crime, of which there is little in Brunei. The aim is to preserve Bruneian society at its present stage and to perpetuate its 'core values'. The Criminal Code complements Brunei's existing sharia family law. As phases II and III have not been triggered yet, and as there is only sketchy detail as to how the sharia legal concept will sit alongside existing laws, it remains difficult to assess at this stage how sharia criminal law might be implemented in the future.

The EU consistently used bilateral meetings with the Bruneian authorities to raise human rights issues. EU Member States have regularly urged Brunei to accede to further core UN human rights instruments. Member States represented in Brunei participated in events to mark International Women's Day to raise awareness of the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Myanmar/Burma

Human rights and democracy, in particular the situation in Rakhine State, non-discrimination, freedom of religion and belief and of expression, remain at the centre of the EU's engagement with Myanmar/Burma.

Ninety-one political parties and over 6 000 candidates contested historic elections in Myanmar/Burma on 8 November 2015. The impressive 69 % turnout bore testimony to the commitment of the people of Myanmar/Burma to change. An EU election observation mission (EU EOM) led by European Parliament Vice-President Graf Lambsdorff helped contribute to the successful conduct of the elections. The 150-strong EU EOM, including seven Members of the European Parliament, was the largest international election observation mission; it was present all over the country, working in close coordination with other international observers. The EU EOM preliminary statement on 10 November 2015 highlighted that the election day was well-run and that polls were competitive. However, for the elections to be genuinely democratic, further legal reforms and procedural improvements, including amendment to the constitution, would be necessary.

Although the National League for Democracy, led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, won an absolute majority in parliament and will appoint the next president and form the new government, the military will continue to hold 25 % of parliamentary seats unelected; it will have a power of veto and be able to appoint three key ministers in the incoming administration.

On 22 June 2015 the Foreign Affairs Council adopted conclusions on forthcoming elections in Myanmar/Burma with the objective of sending an early message to the government as regards EU expectations that credible, inclusive and transparent elections would be held in 2015.

In 2015, the human rights situation did not improve, notably as regards the disenfranchisement of ethnic minorities, in particular the Muslim Rohingya and the continued arrests and detentions of political activists and human rights defenders. Despite the serious concern expressed by the international community, including the EU, Myanmar/Burma adopted four laws on the 'protection of race and religion'. These laws restrict the full enjoyment of human rights for women and persons belonging to minorities as well as freedom of religion and belief. They also run counter to the country's international human rights obligations.

Inter-communal tensions, in particular in Rakhine State, remained high. Some 140 000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), the vast majority of them Rohingya, have remained confined to squalid camps since 2012 without basic rights such as freedom of movement and access to education, health care and the ability to earn a livelihood. Rohingya in northern Rakhine State, where they constitute the majority, face additional restrictions and human rights abuses. Systematic discrimination and marginalisation tempt thousands of Rohingya each year into high-risk journeys across the sea to Malaysia via Thailand, often falling prey to smugglers and traffickers. Some of them end up in modern-day slavery, as highlighted by the migrant crisis in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea in May 2015, and the exposure by Indonesia of slave-caught fish.

In 2015, for the first time, former temporary registration card holders, so-called white card holders, including the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities, could not vote or stand as candidates because they did not hold citizenship. None of the two big parties fielded Muslim candidates due to the strong influence of Buddhist hardliners during campaigning. As a result, the new parliament will not have a single Muslim representative. Incitement to hatred and hate speech continued to go unpunished.

Against this backdrop, the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Human Rights, Lambrinidis, continued his human rights engagement with the country. On the occasion of the second EU-Myanmar human rights dialogue in June 2015, the EUSR visited Rakhine State to look into the complex challenges Rohingya and Rakhine communities were facing. He held key meetings with a number of ministers, NLD leader Aung Saan Su Kyi, civil society, including in a dedicated civil society forum preceding the human rights dialogue, and religious leaders. The EUSR sought progress on all key issues, including segregation of communities and related human rights concerns, citizenship, voting rights, the four laws 'on the protection of race and religion' and rising hate speech, especially against Muslims, both with the government and representatives of the different communities. The human rights dialogue addressed a number of human rights issues, including labour rights, land rights, migration, prisoners of conscience, conditions of detention, non-discrimination, ratification and implementation of core human rights conventions and cooperation in multilateral fora.

On 15 October 2015, the EU signed, as an international witness, a nationwide ceasefire agreement between the government of Myanmar/Burma and ethnic armed groups. The agreement represents an important step towards peace, security and prosperity and allows for the start of a national political dialogue. In a declaration issued on behalf of the EU, HR/VP Mogherini welcomed the signing of the agreement and called for the inclusion of non-signatory groups in the next stage of the process. Inclusiveness will be key for national reconciliation, respect for the rights of persons belonging to minorities and equitable development for all. Despite progress in the peace talks, clashes between the army and some ethnic armed groups have continued in particular in Shan and Kachin States, resulting in further population displacement. There are reports of sexual violence, forced recruitment and forced labour.

The EU demonstrated its commitment to working with the government, the ILO and other partners (e.g. the United States and Japan) on labour rights and corporate social responsibility when it joined the 'Initiative to Promote Fundamental Labour Rights and Practices in Myanmar' in May 2015. Cooperation with civil society was further strengthened. The EU organised a civil society forum ahead of the human rights dialogue to provide information about the human rights challenges in Myanmar/Burma. The EU's roadmap for engagement with civil society was launched on 16 September 2015. Four reference groups were created comprising local CSOs, representatives from EU Member States, INGOs and other development partners. Meetings with human rights defenders continued. The EU conducted and coordinated regular observation of court hearings and trials of human rights defenders and activists, including students detained during protests in March 2015. In 2015 the EU again tabled a human rights resolution on Myanmar/Burma both in the United Nations General Assembly's Third Committee and in the United Nations Human Rights Council. Both resolutions were adopted without a vote.

The Universal Period Review on Myanmar/Burma took place on 6 November 2015.

Myanmar/Burma signed the International Covenant for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on Children in Armed Conflict, as well as joining the friends of the UN Convention against Torture Initiative.

Cambodia

The human rights situation remains a high priority for the EU in Cambodia. There was progress in some areas in the early part of 2015, notably in agreement on amendments to the electoral law, the establishment of a bipartisan National Election Committee (NEC) and some engagement by the government on land issues. However, relations between the two main political parties deteriorated significantly in the second half of the year, with a series of incidents apparently aimed at intimidating the opposition and reducing their freedom of expression, thus degrading political rights. A number of new laws which have been passed or are in the final stages of preparation raise concerns over their possible use to restrict freedom of expression and freedom of association. Serious issues remain over the independence of the judiciary.

On 9 April 2015, the EU Delegation issued a local statement welcoming the appointment of the new NEC. On 15 July 2015, the HR/VP's spokesperson issued a statement on the adoption of a new law on NGOs and associations, expressing regret at insufficient prior consultation of stakeholders and concern about the law's potential to restrict NGO activities. On 27 October 2015 the EU Delegation released a local statement after the beating of two opposition MPs by demonstrators, calling on the authorities to bring those responsible to justice and to take steps to ensure the safety of all democratically elected representatives.

The EU held a regular dialogue on human rights with the Cambodian authorities. The Delegation also had regular contact with civil society organisations, including representatives of indigenous communities. In collaboration with Germany, the EU continued to encourage the government of Cambodia to resolve delays in the delivery of communal land titles to indigenous people, and closely monitor the inclusiveness of land registration. In 2015, EU staff field visits specifically addressed these topics and were the occasion for on-the-spot coordination with NGOs and the local population.

Land distribution is a high priority in EU relations and discussions with the government of Cambodia. The EU Delegation continued to insist on the need for more transparency on the review of state land granted as economic land concessions (ELCs), the future use of land already taken back from ELCs, and land conflict resolution efforts. The EU provided technical assistance to the Royal government of Cambodia in the design of an independent assessment and compensation mechanism for communities affected by sugarcane economic land concessions; the design is still to be agreed by the government.

The issues of trade union rights, violence against workers and the revision of the minimum wage have been priorities in the political dialogue. The EU also held regular dialogues with business associations (in particular those in the garment industry) and individual investors regarding respect for labour rights and decent work.

At the 104th International Labour Conference, the EU contributed to the examination of compliance of Cambodia with the ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. The ILO standard supervisory mechanisms also considered breaches with freedom of association, highlighting serious and urgent cases in this regard.

In 2015 the EU continued to support several human rights-related NGOs and awarded a total of EUR 1 million in new grants and made grants to four human rights defenders in 2015.

The EU is contributing EUR 10 million to the 2015-2016 budget for the national and international components of the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). In 2015 the EU formally became a member of the ECCC's Principal Donors' Group.

People's Republic of China

For the year 2015 the EU's main objectives remained China's ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), signed in 1998, with the medium-term objective of compliance with the ICCPR provisions as well as China's constitution, Criminal Law and Criminal Procedure Law. The EU also pursued its global campaign against the death penalty, especially as China remains the country with the highest number of executions, in spite of the country's efforts to reduce significantly the number of crimes incurring the death penalty, including through the 2015 amendment to the Criminal Procedure Law, which further reduced their number to 46. As one of the central pillars of the ICCPR, freedom of expression in China online and offline also remained an EU priority, as did the development of a vibrant civil society and active human rights defenders. Last but not least, the EU continued to promote the enjoyment of all human rights by persons belonging to minorities, in particular Uighurs and Tibetans.

Overall, the human rights situation continued to deteriorate considerably with a new wave of arrests and detentions targeting some 300 human rights lawyers, activists and law firm personnel beginning in July, although the arrest in May 2014 of a well-known Chinese human rights lawyer, Pu Zhiqiang, who had been involved in a number of cases related to freedom of the press, freedom of expression and the protection of human rights defenders, could be seen as a prelude to this new upsurge of repression. By the end of the year, some 30 lawyers were still under residential surveillance, i.e. being detained in undisclosed locations, without access to legal counsel or visits from their relatives, thereby raising serious questions about China's stated commitment to strengthening the rule of law.

On 20 May 2015, the EU released a spokesperson's statement on the charges against Pu Zhiqiang. In December 2015, Pu Zhiqiang was finally put on trial in Beijing for online social commentary critical of the ruling Communist Party and received a three-year sentence for picking quarrels and inciting ethnic hatred, suspended on medical parole.

The year ended with the de facto expulsion of a French journalist who had published an article critical of China's policy in Xinjiang in a French magazine.

Legal reform gathered pace with the adoption of legislation on national security and counter-terrorism and the introduction of draft legislation on foreign NGOs and cybersecurity, all carrying negative consequences for human rights and civil society space, as well as for the business community. The EU has systematically sent comments in response to China's public consultations on draft legislation in order to encourage China to avoid legal restrictions on human rights without safeguards and out of line with international standards.

The situation in the Tibetan region did not improve, and August 2015 saw the 143rd case of self-immolation among Tibetans (seven in 2015) since February 2009. Furthermore, criminalisation of self-immolations continues, leading to the collective punishment of family members and communities. In Xinjiang, there were more violent clashes between Uighur people and the Chinese authorities, leading to the deaths of over 100 people over the past year, although the lack of information provided by the Chinese authorities and the lack of access for journalists and diplomats make it difficult to gain an accurate picture.

In spite of China's claims before the CAT (Convention against Torture) Committee that it has taken 'effective legislative, administrative, judicial and other measures with a view to strictly prohibiting all acts of torture', the Committee expressed serious concerns about credible allegations of torture, deaths in custody, arbitrary detention and disappearances of Tibetans, Uighurs and Mongolians, as well as consistent reports about a continuing practice of illegal detention in unrecognised and unofficial detention places – the so-called 'black jails' – and the forcible return of fleeing North Koreans.

The EU continued to engage on human rights issues with China in various formats and at various levels. For example, at the June EU-China summit President Tusk raised the human rights situation and made remarks at the concluding press conference expressing the EU's support for China's ambitious reform process, the common wish to further improve cooperation on human rights at the bilateral and international level, and EU concerns on freedom of expression and association, including the situation of persons belonging to minorities, such as Tibetans and Uighurs. In that context, President Tusk encouraged China to resume a meaningful dialogue with the Dalai Lama's representatives. During the annual EU-China Joint Committee on Trade (October 2015), Commissioner Malmström underlined the importance of strengthening the rule of law and an independent judiciary system, allowing lawyers to operate freely and independently and supporting the work of foreign business and citizens. Referring to the importance of digital society for business operating in China, Commissioner Malmström asked her Chinese counterpart 'to contribute to making the internet a vehicle for freedom of expression and free trade'.

The EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Lambrinidis, travelled to China (Beijing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Hong Kong) for the second time in November, and held over 30 separate meetings with senior Chinese officials, representatives from Chinese and European civil society (including lawyers, internet journalists, academics, human rights defenders representing women and sexual minorities, labour rights activists and international organisation officials). The EUSR expressed particular concerns over increasing repression against human rights defenders and lawyers, as well as the direction of legal reform, especially draft legislation on foreign NGOs and other national security laws or draft laws and their negative impact on human rights and civil society. He also discussed the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and the draft law on domestic violence, which was finally adopted in December 2015, including some EU-proposed amendments, labour rights, business and human rights, the rights of persons belonging to religious and ethnic minorities, including in Tibet and Xinjiang, torture and the death penalty.

The 34th EU-China human rights dialogue was held in Beijing on 30 November and 1 December. China continued to put emphasis on its successes in poverty alleviation and the overall improvement of living standards in China and expressed dissatisfaction when the EU raised its concerns, illustrated by individual cases. China raised the EU's management of the refugee crisis and the fight against terrorism and indicated their wish to have more human rights cooperation projects with the EU on topics such as environmental rights, the human rights of women, and business and human rights.

The HR/VP's spokesperson issued seven statements on China in the course of 2015: on the arrest and detention of women's rights activists in China in March, on the sentencing of journalist Gao Yu in April, on charges against human rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang in May, on recent developments in the human rights situation in July, on the ongoing detention of lawyers and human rights defenders and the treatment of their family members in October, and on the sentencing of human rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang, and on China's non-renewal of the visa of European journalist Ms Ursula Gauthier in December.

The EU also referred to the human rights situation in China in the statements it issued during the three regular sessions of the Human Rights Council in March, June and September, and at the UN 70th General Assembly, to convey the EU's various concerns.

Hong Kong

The EU closely followed developments related to universal suffrage for the election of the Chief Executive in 2017. On 18 June 2015 the EU issued a statement by the Spokesperson on political reforms in Hong Kong, calling on all parties to engage in constructive discussions with a view to an early resumption of the electoral reform process. The EU continued to support civil society in Hong Kong through regular contacts with human rights defenders, NGOs and the media, and the organisation of human rights seminars and workshops. In November 2015, EU Special Representative for Human Rights Stavros Lambrinidis visited Hong Kong for the first time and discussed a wide range of issues, including rule of law and the independence of the judiciary under the 'one country, two systems' principle, labour rights, academic and press freedom, social inequality and equal opportunities. In late 2015 five Hong Kong publishers, two of whom hold EU citizenships and are associated with a Hong Kong publishing house and bookshop, disappeared. The circumstances of the disappearances were suspicious.

Taiwan

Overall, the human rights situation is good. However, capital punishment remains a practice which the EU deplors. Six executions took place in June, following previous rounds in 2014, 2013 and 2012, which breached the de facto moratorium observed from 2005 until 2010. In its statement, the EU called for an immediate moratorium on executions, as recommended by a panel of international experts in 2013. The EU remained engaged with local authorities and civil society on working effectively towards the resumption of a moratorium on the death penalty with a view to its formal abolition. In this context, the EU continued to support the NGO Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. In its regular dialogue with Taiwan – the EU-Taiwan annual consultations on non-trade issues – the EU raised its concerns over the death penalty and its continued application.

India

In 2015, the EU's human rights priorities for India focused on the protection of women's and children's rights, the prevention of torture and human rights defenders' rights. The quest for a moratorium on executions leading to abolition of the death penalty and the pledge to combat all forms of discrimination remained high on the agenda.

India is a vast and vibrant democracy with a solid constitutional and institutional framework that aims to protect human rights. Deeply entrenched societal practices which the government cannot overcome through affirmative action alone remain the root cause of many human rights issues in India. Abuses and discrimination issues, affecting Dalits in particular, as well as gender-based violence and religious intolerance, are widely reported by the media and civil society. Overall, freedom of expression is respected. The Supreme Court struck down a controversial legislative amendment restricting freedom of expression on the internet in March. Stricter implementation of the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, amended in 2010, has affected some 13 000 CSOs' access to foreign funding. There are at least 2 million CSOs in India, of which about 42 000 are licensed to receive foreign funding.

The EU engaged in dialogue with a wide range of human rights stakeholders, including civil society representatives, government officials and dedicated institutions, in spite of the absence of the annual human rights dialogue. Leading political figures, including Ministers of State or Chief Ministers, have attended EU-sponsored human rights projects functions in the last year. Human rights issues were discussed during the visit of the Speaker of Lok Sabha to the European Parliament in June and the visit of the European Parliament Delegation for Relations with India to New Delhi in March.

With a view to promoting women's and children's rights the EU took part in several events, particularly around International Women's Day and International Girl Child Day. In October, a community intervention dialogue with government officials was held in Jaipur as part of the EU-funded three-year project on promoting gender equality and combating discrimination against the girl child in selected districts of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand.

After a pause of about two years, one execution took place on 30 July 2015, as capital punishment was applied to an individual convicted of participating in the 1993 Bombay attacks. Barely a month later, the Law Commission of India submitted its report on the death penalty suggesting the abolition of capital punishment in all circumstances except in case of terrorism and war against the country. Marking the World Day against the Death Penalty on 10 October, an EIDHR-sponsored project organised an event, reflecting the EU's sustained interest.

The EU engaged on the situation of human rights defenders, interacting with human rights defenders networks, including during field trips (e.g. in Manipur), dealing with the individual cases of human rights defenders and providing assistance to those in need through the HRD emergency support mechanism on a case-by-case basis.

Another EU-sponsored project worked in the field of police reforms in South Asia, encompassing activities such as the development of a virtual police station, an innovative training tool already implemented by the Rajasthan Police Training Academy.

A large portfolio of ongoing projects sponsored by the EU and/or Member States covers gender and child rights, disability rights, indigenous peoples' rights, trafficking in human beings, abolition of the death penalty, and freedom of expression online and offline.

Under the EIDHR, the EU launched a local call for proposals, with a budget of EUR 1.9 million, the objective of which is to increase the local CSOs' capacities to promote human rights based on the principles of equality, inclusion and non-discrimination. Selected projects focus on social inclusion of marginalised communities, particularly religious minorities, inclusive policing, access to justice for death row convicts, promoting pluralism and diversity within national human rights institutions and fostering inclusion and diversity in the workplace.

Indonesia

Throughout the year the EU paid close attention in particular to the issues of freedom of religion and belief and the protection of persons belonging to minority groups. The EU Delegation in Jakarta held regular meetings with minority groups, victims of intolerance and human rights organisations working on this issue. The EU Delegation continued its cooperation with Nahdlatul Ulama, the country's largest Muslim organisation espousing tolerance and pluralism. The Delegation also organised a seminar on 'religion and public piety', together with Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta.

Indonesia executed 14 people in 2015 (six in January and eight in April) for drug offences, including 12 foreign nationals. At least 130 prisoners remain on death row, roughly half for drug offences. The EU issued statements condemning the executions in January, February and April. The EU maintained close contact with high-level officials, underlining its opposition to the death penalty and calling on the Indonesian government to halt further executions. In conjunction with the World Day against the Death Penalty on 10 October the EU Delegation ran a social media campaign against capital punishment.

The government of the autonomous province of Aceh announced that as of 23 October the extended Islamic Criminal Code (*qanun jinayat*) applies in the province. This bylaw criminalises, among other things, same-sex sexual relations and consensual sex outside marriage. In meetings with central government and local officials, the EU Delegation raised concerns about possible implications of the new sharia bylaw for minority groups and called for the authorities to safeguard human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, regardless of religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

The EU closely followed developments in the provinces of Papua and West Papua and welcomed President Widodo's decision to grant clemency to several political prisoners and open access to Papua for all foreign journalists. There continue to be concerns with regard to violence and human rights violations by security services as well as restrictions on freedom of expression in the provinces. The EU Delegation hosted several meetings with Papuan human rights defenders.

Torture prevention remains a priority for the EU in Indonesia. The EU Delegation is working with the National Human Rights Commission and the Geneva-based Association for the Prevention of Torture on strengthening oversight mechanisms. The Delegation organised a social media campaign to commemorate International Day in Support of Victims of Torture.

On the issue of business and human rights the EU Delegation provided support to the Foundation for International Human Rights Reporting Standards (FIHRRST) which has developed and is promoting human rights reporting standards for companies and drafted a Human Rights Charter for the city of Bandung, together with the mayor.

The EIDHR supported 13 projects in 2015, covering a broad spectrum of issues, including elections, conflict resolution and mediation, freedom of religion, business and human rights, accountability for human rights violations and the protection of vulnerable groups.

Japan

The EU maintained its long-standing cooperation on human rights with Japan, a country which shares our values and outlook in many respects and wants to be seen as a responsible global actor. Japan is more interested than ever in engaging with the EU on human rights issues. In 2015, the EU and Japan continued to hold consultations on human rights as part of a shared commitment to promoting respect for human rights worldwide. They continued to show commitment to human rights at the UN, actively participating in the work of the Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly, including on the jointly sponsored resolution on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Work progressed through the year on the negotiation of the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement on political, global and other sectoral cooperation, including human rights aspects.

The death penalty stayed high on the human rights agenda in 2015 as Japan continued to apply it, despite calls from the EU for abolition or adoption of a moratorium on executions. In 2015, three persons were executed (one in June and two in December). The EU publicly condemned these executions. It continued its active engagement with the Japanese government and civil society on the death penalty issue via political statements, messages posted on social media and meetings with representatives of the Diet and civil society to advocate public debate on the death penalty. The EU also supported the Waseda University study on the death penalty in Japan.

The EU's scope of work with Japan in the area of human rights continued to broaden: specific activities were undertaken in the field of gender equality; the EU raised the issue of press freedom (following the adoption of the new legislation on State secrets) and prison conditions in Japan, and also raised awareness of LGBTI issues in Japan (through joint activities on the occasion of Tokyo Rainbow Week).

Under the umbrella of the EC's industrial policy dialogue with Japan, the second EU-Japan Working Group on Corporate Social Responsibility was held on 25 and 26 November 2015. Participants held discussions on cooperation between Japan and the EU in the field of CSR.

Republic of Korea

Respect for universal principles of human rights is an essential element of the EU-Republic of Korea Framework Agreement agreed, along with the Free Trade Agreement and the declaration of a Strategic Partnership, in 2010.

At the EU-Republic of Korea Summit held in September 2015, the leaders reiterated that promotion and protection of human rights is crucial to maintaining peace and security and achieving sustainable development. They shared the view that complex crises and attempts to shrink the space for civil society around the world required attention and joint efforts. In this context, they committed to further enhancing cooperation in the field of human rights.

The Republic of Korea continues to be one of the most like-minded partners for the EU in UN human rights fora, i.e. at the General Assembly Third Committee and the Human Rights Council. It submitted its report to the Human Rights Committee on its implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Committee issued its conclusions in October 2015. The Republic of Korea was re-elected to the Human Rights Council and will serve as President of the HRC in 2016.

The second round of EU- Republic of Korea Human Rights Consultations took place in Brussels in June 2015 and provided the opportunity to further strengthen cooperation on international priorities for 2015. The two sides worked in particular to maintain international attention on the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea..

In Seoul, the EU monitored developments in the implementation of laws that could affect the overall environment for the exercise of freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, while noting the diverse range of opinions and vibrant political debate in South Korean democracy. Concerns were raised about the continued imprisonment of conscientious objectors to military service (approximately 600 men are serving 18-month prison sentences for refusing to undertake armed military service). The Republic of Korea has not yet ratified the core labour standards conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining. This is addressed in the EU-Republic of Korea meetings under the follow-up of the EU- Republic of Korea Free Trade Agreement. The EU and the Republic of Korea agreed in this framework on a joint cooperation on implementing the core labour standard convention on non-discrimination in employment. The International Labour Conference considered application problems in the Republic of Korea with this convention.

The EU welcomed the long-standing de facto moratorium on the implementation of executions, which has been in place for 17 years, and continued to encourage the legal abolition of capital punishment. The EU was pleased to cooperate with civil society organisations in celebrating the equal rights of LGBTI people at the Pride Festival in the centre of Seoul.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

The EU remains concerned at the reports of serious and widespread human rights abuses in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Improvements in respect for human rights in the country remain at the centre of EU policy towards the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Throughout 2015, the EU continued its efforts to involve the international community at large in addressing these concerns, participating in all relevant key fora and closely cooperating with its partners. It has regularly raised the refoulement of Democratic People's Republic of Korea citizens from other countries, especially those from countries with a shared border with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, calling for full respect for the principle of non-refoulement.

The EU, together with Japan, co-initiated two resolutions in the Human Rights Council and UN General Assembly which once again reflected the conclusions and recommendations of the UN commission of inquiry's report issued in 2014 and the reports of the UNSG and the Special Rapporteur. They underlined the gravity and urgency of the situation and recommended that the UN Security Council consider referring the situation to the International Criminal Court and impose sanctions on those who appear most responsible for crimes against humanity. A number of EU Member States worked with other partners to facilitate the inclusion of the situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the agenda of the UN Security Council, which discussed the situation for a second time in December 2015.

The EU welcomed the start of activities of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights' field-based structure in Seoul. Its purpose is to strengthen the monitoring and documentation of the human rights situation, to ensure accountability, to provide the Special Rapporteur with increased support, to enhance the engagement and capacity building of the governments of all states concerned, civil society and other stakeholders and to maintain the visibility of the human rights situation in the country.

As part of its critical engagement policy, the EU maintained an open door to dialogue with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Human rights concerns were addressed during the EU-Democratic People’s Republic of Korea political dialogue of June 2015. The EUSR for Human Rights remains ready to visit the country if conditions for constructive engagement are there, with the objective of exchanging views and pressing for concrete improvements on the ground. The EU welcomed some positive signals by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (such as the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and preparations to submit a report on its implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child to the Committee on the Rights of the Child) and has encouraged it to do much more, including fully implementing the UPR recommendations it accepted back in 2014 and cooperating with the human rights mechanisms of the UN. The EU continued to engage inside the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea on a number of projects, mostly focused on food security, health, water and sanitation, that benefit some of the most vulnerable people in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. It welcomes ongoing cooperation in these domains between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea authorities and international stakeholders, including the EU's implementing partners.

Laos

In 2015 the human rights situation in Laos remained challenging. Freedom of expression in Laos is not yet an accepted fundamental right in practice. The media is heavily scrutinised by the state agencies and self-censorship of journalists is a daily reality. The adoption of the law on cybercrime further tightened the state's grip over 'negative use' of the internet and social media. Several netizens have been the object of intimidation for expressing their views online. Freedom of assembly and freedom of association are also not yet respected. It is not possible to carry out legal civil society action on a range of sensitive issues including land rights, corruption and rights of persons belonging to ethnic minorities without the risk of intimidation and retaliation. The state still attempts to manage a large part of the space for civil society through 'mass organisations' which are effectively an extension of the state. Reform of the legislative and regulatory environment for Lao CSOs and INGOs has not expanded their limited operating space, and a climate of intimidation characterises the sector. The rate of registration of national CSOs is low and declining.

The death penalty is still enshrined in the Penal Code for most serious crimes (e.g. drug trafficking). A de facto moratorium applies. In the context of the Penal Code review, efforts are being made to reduce the use of capital punishment. There is no public information on the use of the death penalty.

The second Universal Periodic Review of Laos took place in 2015. In June Laos accepted 116 out of the 196 recommendations proposed. Most recommendations concerning civil and political rights were rejected. These included the Rome Statute, cooperation with special procedures and National Human Rights Institutions, the death penalty, freedom of expression/association/assembly, civil society and Sombath Somphone's disappearance. In this regard, after more than 1 000 days, the EU continues to express deep concern at the unexplained disappearance of Sombath Somphone and has asked for further explanations concerning the investigation.

During the EU-Laos human rights dialogue in November, Laos agreed to organise a meeting for the EU and Member States with the Head of the Investigation Team. The EU also enquired about the fate of Bounthanh Thammavong, a Polish citizen, who was arrested on 19 June and sentenced on 25 September, for propaganda against Laos, to five years' imprisonment and a fine of LAK 9.5 million. During the EU-Laos human rights dialogue in November, the EU expressed its concerns about the case and about undue restrictions, in view of Laos' international obligations, regarding access to consular assistance and due process.

Malaysia

In 2015 the EU and Malaysia finalised the text of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, after nearly five years of negotiations. The finalised PCA text comprises 60 articles, including a human rights clause providing for a structured human rights dialogue.

The high degree of control over print media remained unchanged, while freedom of expression online plummeted further in 2015: 220 individuals were investigated under the Sedition Act, of whom 11 were charged and three were sentenced. The act has been increasingly used to control social media. A strengthened version of the Sedition Act considerably extends the penalties for sedition.

The government has resorted to tactics of intimidation through increased use of repressive laws to stifle dissent. A new Prevention of Terrorism Act permits indefinite detention without trial or judicial review. A series of other laws allow administrative panels to extend detention periods, and also permit the use of secret evidence and witnesses. These steps represent a serious regression and constitute a severe threat to the already very limited freedom of expression in the country.

Furthermore, on 3 December the Malaysian Parliament passed the National Security Council Bill 2015. The bill encompasses broad powers to declare 'security areas' and arrest, detain and seize property without warrant. No action or lawsuit can be brought against the security forces. The term 'national security' was not clearly defined. MPs, lawyers and human rights activists have raised concerns over the lack of consultation and the scope for abuse.

The conviction of de facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim to five years' imprisonment on the charge of sodomy and the conduct of the trial have created serious concerns about its political motivation. In October, the UN Working Group Against Arbitrary Detention found that Anwar's deprivation of liberty was arbitrary.

The LGBTI community continues to face serious discrimination in Malaysia, with same-sex relationships being criminalised. In October, The Federal Court set aside, on a technicality, a previous ruling by the Court of Appeal that the criminalisation of cross-dressing was unconstitutional.

In July, the US State Department officially upgraded Malaysia to Tier 2 Watch List in its annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report. Malaysia was Tier 3 in 2014. The TIP Report stated that the discovery of more than 139 graves at 28 Rohingya human trafficking transit camps in May was outside of the reporting period.

The EU Delegation hosted a number of meetings with human rights defenders throughout the reporting period. Furthermore, the EUDEL, EU Member States, like-minded countries and the OHCHR held regular coordination meetings on human rights defenders (HRDs). The EU Delegation and EU Member States regularly attended court hearings on cases concerning prominent HRDs, raised their cases with the government and engaged with them in high-level visits.

On 10 February 2015, the HR/VP's spokesperson issued a statement regarding the conviction and sentencing of opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim which, in the EU's view, raised serious questions regarding due process of law.

On 17 March 2015, the HR/VP's spokesperson issued a statement regarding the detention and investigation of MP Nurul Izzah, stressing that freedom of expression, the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law are essential features of a democratic system and need to be upheld.

On 15 April 2015, the HR/VP's spokesperson issued a statement on the recently adopted amendment to the Sedition Act, pointing out that the Sedition Act was supposed to be repealed, as previously announced in 2012, and that its reinforcement could have implications for the exercise of freedom of expression, as demonstrated by recent controversial instances of application of the Act.

In May 2015, in conjunction with World Press Freedom Day, the EU Delegation organised the Journalism Now Forum with the participation of journalists, media managers, editors, political activists and diplomats. The forum underlined the importance of press freedom in Malaysia.

On 11-12 June, the EU Delegation and the Embassy of France supported *Ensemble Contre La Peine de Mort* (Together against the Death Penalty, ECPM) and the Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN) in organising an Asian Regional Congress against the death penalty in Kuala Lumpur.

On 17 November, the EU Delegation and the UK FCO supported Parliamentarians for Global Action with the organisation of a roundtable on the abolition of the mandatory death penalty in Malaysia, which took place at the Malaysian parliament.

In September 2015, the EU sponsored the participation of Malaysian political cartoonist Zunar in an event on freedom of expression organised in Paris by Cartooning for Peace with the support of the EU.

In December, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on Malaysia. The resolution deplored the deteriorating human rights situation in the country, urged the Malaysian government to release all political prisoners and repeal restrictive legislation and urged the EU to step up efforts to finance projects in Malaysia, including under the EIDHR.

On 23 December, the Delegation delivered a demarche to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia on violence against children and women, with a focus on ending child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C).

There is an ongoing project funded under the EIDHR on 'Networking for freedom online and offline: protecting freedom of information, expression and association on the internet in India, Malaysia and Pakistan'. The project is managed by the Delegation in New Delhi and is being implemented in Malaysia by EMPOWER Malaysia between February 2014 and February 2017.

Maldives

2015 was a politically tumultuous year in the Maldives, with negative consequences for democracy and human rights. The EU continued to express serious concerns about the rule of law in the country, especially political intervention in the judiciary, unconstitutional manipulation of laws for political purposes and overnight changes to the constitution so as to consolidate executive power.

The year was characterised by shrinking space for civil society organisations working on democracy and human rights, including as a result of legal restrictions (e.g. new regulations on non-governmental organisations) and harassment by the authorities. Issues such as youth radicalisation, religious extremism, gender violence and the politicisation of institutions intensified. Another major concern for the EU is the moves towards restarting executions after a moratorium of more than 60 years.

The prosecution and continued imprisonment of former President Nasheed, as well as of other political opposition figures, including former Defence Minister Mohamed Nazim and former Vice-President Ahmed Adeeb, drew international and local criticism for lack of due process and procedural irregularities. The EU issued statements following the arrest and sentencing of former President Nasheed to 13 years' imprisonment on terrorism charges. In April the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for Mr Nasheed's release. In October, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention published an opinion concluding that Mr Nasheed's detention was arbitrary and called for his immediate release.

The EU issued further statements expressing concern about the rule of law situation in the Maldives and condemning the violence which occurred during the May Day public demonstration and at other anti-government protests later in the year.

In April, the EU Heads of Missions in Sri Lanka met in Male with the Maldivian government, the main political parties, the Speaker of Parliament, and the Elections Commission. In all meetings the Heads of Missions reiterated the key EU messages: the importance of democratic principles such as the rule of law and protection of human rights, an appeal for calm and restraint on the part of all sides in the face of tense situations, and an appeal for political dialogue to resolve political issues.

The EU and its Member States were active during the second Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the Maldives on 6 May. While progress was noted in certain areas, such as the Maldives' accession to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and steps taken to promote access to education and health, the general sentiment was that there had been serious setbacks in the human rights situation in the country since its last review four years ago. Moreover, the independence of the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives and its ability to engage with the UN human rights system were severely undermined by the Supreme Court ruling in a *suo motu* case initiated in 2014 against five members, following the Commission's submission of a written contribution to the UPR. In November, the EU issued a statement criticising the declaration of a 30-day state of emergency by President Yameen, who cited a heightened national security threat following an explosion on the presidential speedboat in September and the discovery of weapons in two different areas of the country. The state of emergency was lifted after six days. However, the decree, which restricted several fundamental rights stipulated in the constitution, was used in police raids on private properties and two television stations and in arrests of journalists.

In December, the European Parliament adopted another resolution expressing concern about 'the gradual deterioration of the democratic standards and increasingly authoritarian tendencies in the Maldives'. The resolution called on the government to release, immediately and unconditionally, former President Mohamed Nasheed, former Vice-President Ahmed Adeeb, and former Defence Ministers Tholhath Ibrahim and Mohamed Nazim, together with Sheikh Imran Abdulla and other political prisoners. It also called on the EU to impose asset freezes and travel bans on members of the Maldivian government and their leading supporters in the Maldivian business community.

The EU and its Member States also continued engaging with the government of the Maldives, the Human Rights Commission, opposition politicians, and civil society.

Mongolia

In 2015 Mongolia celebrated the 25th anniversary of its first free and fair elections. Over this period, Mongolia has consolidated its democratic system, which is characterised by independent executive and legislative branches of government, and national authorities which have expressed a commitment to the increased professionalisation and independence of the judiciary. The existence of freedom of expression and association, and the generally unimpeded operation of civil society and the media also act as pillars for the preservation of democratic governance. The overall environment for civil society is good and continues to improve, and non-governmental organisations are active and involved in shaping policies due to the overall absence of restrictions on their operation.

In their cooperation on human rights with Mongolia, the EU and its Member States have concentrated on issues such as promoting the rule of law, assisting in the development of civil society, providing the means to empower vulnerable groups at national level and in remote areas and providing access to effective mechanisms for redress and to public services relevant to the promotion of economic, social and cultural rights. In December 2015 both sides also agreed to launch an EU-Mongolia human rights dialogue, with objectives including bilateral cooperation on issues of mutual interest related to human rights, the rule of law and democratic principles, and the exchange of information and best practices to promote and consolidate respect for human rights.

During the period under review, there were a number of positive developments, notably the fact that the amended Criminal Code, which was approved by Mongolia's parliament in early December (and which will come into effect in September 2016), explicitly abolishes the death penalty. Once implemented, it is hoped that the new code will also result in a revision of the definition of torture in accordance with the provisions of the Convention against Torture and the establishment of an independent mechanism to investigate cases of torture and ill-treatment committed by law enforcement officials. These revisions would be substantially in line with the recommendations Mongolia received during its Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

The level of poverty in Mongolia has continually decreased, from 27.4 % in 2012 to 21.6 % in 2014. However, Mongolia continues to face a number of challenges. These include the need to ensure that sustainable development policies are implemented in a wider area of the country, including in *ger* (yurt) districts in Ulaanbataar; extend the availability of adequate health care to remote areas; consistently pursue the implementation of legal provisions related to environmental protection; act to minimise the impact of air pollution on citizens' health; and provide support to persons with disabilities.

Mongolia also continues to address the challenge of investigating and preventing corruption, which remains a significant problem. Although most international measures of the extent of corruption do not indicate a worsening situation, pessimism about the existence of corruption among Mongolians and its effect on the country's elections appears to be worsening. Domestic violence also continues to be a widespread problem.

The EU has been active in supporting and encouraging Mongolia's international engagements, notably during the 2015 UPR. In addition, human rights issues were raised within the GSP+ framework and in this context important progress has been achieved. Not only has Mongolia ratified all the GSP+-relevant UN human rights conventions, without reservations, but there has also been a clear improvement in the level of compliance with the reporting obligations vis-à-vis the treaty monitoring bodies and the implementation of commitments. Indeed, as already mentioned, in December 2015 Mongolia's parliament voted in favour of amendments to the country's Criminal Code, which included the abolition of the death penalty.

Member States have pursued a number of activities to maintain and enhance contacts with civil society. These included events and public diplomacy efforts designed to communicate EU priorities, such as events on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, a roundtable on freedom of expression on International Press Freedom Day, a conference on the right to health organised with Mongolian civil society, and another event focusing on the right to a healthy environment and the importance of addressing climate change in the run-up to COP 21.

Nepal

The main human rights issues affecting Nepal are the political uncertainty and the agitation triggered by the disagreements over the process of drafting the constitution (especially on issues such as representation and boundary delineation), the long-lasting legacy of the conflict and prevailing culture of impunity, and the poverty and discrimination affecting large segments of the population. In 2015, the EU focused its attention on monitoring the process of drawing up the constitution, on promoting access to justice for the victims of conflict and on the post-earthquake relief and reconstruction efforts, including through a state-building contract.

After a protracted negotiation process, the Constituent Assembly of Nepal adopted a new constitution on 20 September 2015. Nepal is defined as a secular, federal, multi-ethnic and inclusive democratic republican state, with sovereignty vested in the people. The constitution stipulates the right to equality, non-discrimination and the right not to be categorised as untouchable, as well as the right to be free from exploitation based on traditions. It introduces proportional inclusive representation: women and ethnic and caste minorities will have constitutional rights to participate in state bodies on the basis of the inclusive principle, the federal legislature will have at least one third of the seats from each political party filled by women, and either the president or the vice-president of the country should be a woman.

The ninth Nepal-EU Joint Commission addressed the human rights situation in Nepal. The discussion focused particularly on impunity, including recent violence in the Madhesh, as well as extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions and treatment in custody; gender equality, including the discriminatory provisions on citizenship and the aggravation of human trafficking; caste-based discrimination; transitional justice; and the situation of refugees.

The EU has continued its work on priority areas, including gender, non-discrimination and the fight against impunity, through its development programmes as well as specific human rights actions targeting the most vulnerable. The EU continued its support for the implementation of the National Action Plan on UNSCRs 1325 and 1820 on women, peace and security and violence against women, through funding via the Nepal Peace Trust Fund. In March, the EU Delegation organised a Film Festival on Youth, in which children and young people's rights were emphasised. The EU engaged on the situation of human rights defenders through support for civil society projects.

Thematic projects funded through the EIDHR and non-state actors and local authorities (NSA-LA) thematic lines have contributed to promoting the economic, social and cultural rights of marginalised communities. Empowerment of marginalised communities, fostering accountability and transparency, has contributed to enhancing the participation of women, Dalits and disabled people in decision-making processes and to improving their access to justice. Fighting discriminatory practices such as *chhaupadi* (placing women in cowsheds during the menstruation period) and support for HIV-affected children and slum dwellers have had a positive impact on the situation of women and children.

Pakistan

The human rights situation in Pakistan remains highly problematic. While a framework is gradually being put in place with key human rights institutions, many of these are still finding their way in terms of filling their mandate with real content and the staffing, offices and equipment they need to be able to work effectively. Pakistan has announced that a National Action Plan on Human Rights has been drafted and is expected to be adopted soon. However, in the context of GSP+, the EU expressed strong concern about the lack of tangible progress in specific human rights areas.

The fight against terrorism has created new human rights challenges. Following the terrorist attack in December 2014 on an army school in Peshawar killing 148 people, including 132 children, the government approved a National Action Plan against Terrorism (NAP), lifted the moratorium on the death penalty in place since 2008 and, for a period of two years, extended the jurisdiction of military courts to civilians accused of terrorism. Over 300 executions were carried out in 2015. There is in many cases evidence suggesting widespread use of torture to extract confessions. In a number of cases there is uncertainty whether convicts were under 18 when they committed the crimes for which they were convicted. Due to the absence of a reliable birth registration system in Pakistan it is often difficult to assess the age of a person. The selective transfer of civilian cases to military courts is another serious source of concern, notably with respect to the obligation to provide a fair trial, as prescribed in Article 14 ICCPR.

As part of a general tightening of control by the government, all international NGOs have been ordered to comply with more stringent registration requirements.

Other areas where the situation has remained particularly problematic over the last year are the failure to protect minorities, journalists and human rights defenders, and the continuation of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances.

With regard to freedom of religion and belief, religious minorities in Pakistan live in fear of persecution and violence. Shias were the group most frequently targeted in sectarian attacks, and the already difficult situation of Christians, Ahmadis, and Hindus continued to arouse concern. In January, a Shia mosque was bombed, killing 53; in March two churches were attacked near Lahore causing few fatalities due to the prompt reaction of security personnel; and in May a bus with Ismaili passengers was ambushed near Karachi, resulting in 46 deaths. As part of the NAP, the government has taken some action against hate speech, but progress is still limited.

Some measures have been introduced to strengthen the procedural safeguards against misuse of the blasphemy law. The Supreme Court ruled that it is the obligation of the state to ensure that no innocent person is compelled or constrained to face an investigation or a trial on the basis of false or trumped-up allegations regarding commission of such an offence. It further ruled that criticising the misuse of the blasphemy laws and calling for the introduction of legal safeguards do not constitute blasphemy.

Gender equality also registered another difficult year as thousands of cases of violence and discrimination against women were reported. Huge differences persist between women of the upper class and those belonging to the lower strata of society. The gap between urban and rural society also remains remarkable.

Freedom of expression is under stress. Media operators practise self-censorship and are regularly intimidated. Threats, violence and killing of journalists are the most extreme examples. Pakistan is considered one of the world's most dangerous places to be a journalist.

Major weaknesses remain in the police and the judicial system, which combined with the death penalty carry a high risk of miscarriage of justice.

The European Parliament South Asia Delegation visited Pakistan in February 2015. The first EU-Pakistan local meeting on human rights took place in March in Islamabad. This local dialogue is supplementing the Sub-group on Governance and Human Rights under the EU-Pakistan Joint Commission, which met on 7 September 2015 in Brussels. On all these occasions, the various human rights challenges were discussed, including the death penalty, the situation of religious minorities, the military courts and more broadly the effective implementation of human rights conventions linked with the GSP+ scheme. In the July FAC conclusions, the Council called on Pakistan to prioritise and take further action to respect, protect and promote freedom of religion or belief, the rights of persons belonging to minorities, the rights of women and rights of the child, and freedom of expression, including for journalists and human rights defenders.

The EU has expressed strong concern over the lifting of the moratorium on executions: several statements were issued and HR/VP Mogherini wrote to Sartaj Aziz, Special Advisor to the Prime Minister on National Security and Foreign Affairs, in this regard. The EU Delegation, in close coordination with Member States, followed a number of individual cases where execution could imply a violation of Pakistan's human rights obligations (execution of juveniles, use of torture, fair trial violations).

The Delegation regularly followed the law-making process, notably the NGO legislation and an upcoming cybercrime bill. The EU further raised concerns about specific violations with the authorities throughout the year (including the blasphemy case of Asia Bibi, who has now filed for last-instance review of the sentence by the Supreme Court).

The EU also continued to provide support in the fields of the rule of law, women's and children's rights and freedom of religion or belief.

Philippines

Although the overall human rights situation in the Philippines remains a matter of concern for the EU, it does not appear to have significantly deteriorated in 2015. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the Philippines signed in 2012 is expected to enter into force in 2016. As it includes provision for cooperation on human rights, it will provide an institutional opportunity to engage on the matter in a more structured format.

The major problem of the Philippines remains the culture of impunity as cases of grave human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings and torture, remain largely unresolved. This includes not only cases of major human rights abuses from the past, but also the killings of human rights activists and media workers which have occurred in recent years. Impunity has various structural causes, such as problems of access to justice for the majority of the population (especially low-income groups, because of the high costs of litigation and the complexity of the rules for implementing regulations), and the long delays in legal proceedings which result in many cases outliving the complainants.

Since 2010, the Aquino administration has endeavoured to strengthen the country's human rights legal framework. The number of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances has declined in comparison with the previous administration.

Nevertheless, there remain gaps in terms of command responsibility, policy and practice, as laws are not always fully implemented and monitoring is weak, especially in the provinces. The administrative process is slow in the government agencies tasked with investigating and providing evidence to substantiate alleged human rights violations.

The situation of indigenous people and of human rights defenders is of concern. The same applies to the role of private armies and paramilitary groups. The Aquino administration has not revoked Executive Order 546, which legitimised the creation of paramilitary groups and private armies, signed under former President Arroyo. Human rights organisations recognise the intent of the current political leadership and administration to protect human rights and bring abusers to justice, and in particular to end killings of activists and journalists, yet ask for actual improvement on the ground.

With many abuses taking place in more remote areas under the influence of local political or business interests, the difficulty of ensuring that national-level policies are implemented at local level has to be acknowledged in this context.

As regards the status of ratification and reporting, the Philippines has ratified all seven relevant UN HR Conventions and (with the exception of the report on CERD) complies with all reporting obligations. Nevertheless, there are serious issues of implementation of the national laws related to human rights.

On a more positive note, it should be noted that despite the extrajudicial killings and the climate of impunity, civil society in the Philippines in general remains vibrant.

Women's rights are actively promoted in the Philippines, for instance through the Philippine Commission on Women and the implementation of the Magna Carta on Women.

In line with the compliance with the reporting obligations under the UN Conventions, there is also a clear sense that the government takes its obligations under the GSP+ mechanism very seriously.

In 2015, the EU continued to engage with the relevant interlocutors, including the national and regional Commissions on Human Rights (CHR), state actors, human rights defenders and civil society. In its regular political dialogue with the Philippine authorities, the EU repeatedly noted the need to address the issue of impunity more systematically, and to bring the perpetrators of gross human rights violations to justice.

The EU continued providing financial support through the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) and the Instrument for Stability (IfS) in the following areas: the 'Justice for All' programme, aimed at enhancing access to justice and fighting impunity; capacity building for the Regional Human Rights Commission in the Autonomous Region in Mindanao; and the protection of the economic, social and cultural rights of the population, focusing on poverty alleviation, human and social development, and good governance.

Singapore

The human rights situation in Singapore in 2015 has seen developments on various levels. While Singapore has made further steps towards meeting international human rights goals, there remains room for improvement on various issues.

The EU welcomed the reform in 2012/2013 of Singapore's mandatory death penalty regime, which restricted an automatic death penalty to murder with intent, firearms offences and trafficking above a quantitative threshold in illicit drugs. During this period, a de facto moratorium was maintained. However, executions resumed in 2014 and continued in 2015. Information on the executions is limited to an annual report of the total number of executions, with no further details. Some specific death penalty cases and executions are reported through a press statement or in the media.

On 30 October 2014, the Appeals Court of Singapore upheld the constitutionality of Section 377a of the Penal Code. The law criminalises any act of gross indecency between men, even when consensual and in private. While Singapore's society remains divided on LGBTI issues, over the past few years, prominent public figures and numerous religious leaders in Singapore have called for the acceptance of LGBTI members of their community. The city-state is also seeing growing attendance at the yearly 'Pink Dot' celebration, which seeks to promote the freedom to love.

2015 has seen restrictions on freedom of expression in Singapore, against the backdrop of the general elections, the death of founding father Lee Kuan Yew and the 50th anniversary of Singapore's independence. One prominent freedom of expression case is still ongoing. Two leading members of civil society have been fined for statements written on their blogs. Their cases have set precedents for netizens in Singapore. They were respectively found guilty of defamation of PM Lee Hsien Loong and of contempt of court (scandalising the judiciary).

A fourth case involved a teenage blogger who was found guilty of making offensive comments intended to hurt the feelings of Christians. He was found guilty and received a four-week prison sentence, which when backdated saw his immediate release. Regarding the Protection from Harassment Act (PHA), a recent judgement ruled, in favour of the defendant, that a government ministry could not be considered a 'person' under the PHA.

The EU's activities in the field of human rights in 2015 consisted of monitoring and reporting, delivering demarches, coordinating closely with Member States, as well as organising meetings, dialogues, and a number of events.

In line with its human rights mandate, the EU Delegation hosted numerous dialogues with prominent members of Singapore's civil society, ranging from LGBTI issues to freedom of expression, the death penalty and challenges facing civil society.

To commemorate the European and World Day against the Death Penalty, the EU organised a panel discussion on the death penalty in Singapore. It was the second time that an event of this kind in Singapore had been held outside Delegation premises, at the National University of Singapore. Panellists included a local criminal defence lawyer, an anti-death penalty activist and two professors of criminal law. The audience consisted of legal practitioners, academics, students, diplomats from like-minded nations and EU Political Counsellors.

The Human Rights Day conference in 2015 focused on 'progress and perspectives on women's rights in Singapore and ASEAN'. The seminar featured three dedicated panels: 'Progress in Singapore since ratifying CEDAW 20 years ago', 'Challenges to women's rights in Southeast Asia', and 'Perspectives on women's rights in Europe and Asia'.

Sri Lanka

The victory of President Sirisena with a mandate for reform and a good governance agenda in the presidential elections held in January 2015 was a turning point for Sri Lanka in all respects, including in terms of human rights. As a result, the space for civil society activities and diverging views in political debates has significantly improved.

At the invitation of the Sri Lankan government, the EU deployed an election observation mission (EU EOM) for the parliamentary elections in August 2015. The mission concluded positively, stating that the elections were 'well-administered and offered voters a genuine choice from among a broad range of political alternatives'. The EU EOM, however, made a number of recommendations on how to further improve the electoral system and bring it fully into line with international standards. The EU also provided EUR 1.2 million in financial support to domestic electoral observer organisations which played a crucial role as active observers in both elections in 2015. The activities supported include voter education, media training and election observation. As a result, more than 15 000 observers were deployed on election day.

During 2015 important steps were taken towards increased media freedom and the removal of censorship, although the decision by President Sirisena to revive the Press Council, used by the former administration to control the press and on occasions to imprison and sanction journalists, has been criticised by human rights groups and free press advocates.

A major positive development was the adoption of the 19th amendment to the constitution which curtailed presidential powers and established the Constitutional Council. The latter re-established a number of independent commissions, including the Human Rights Commission, helping to restore systematic checks and balances.

In 2015, the government of Sri Lanka engaged and cooperated with the UN and its human rights mechanisms. For the first time Sri Lanka co-sponsored a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council, committing to establishing the necessary mechanisms for investigating and prosecuting alleged violations of human rights and international humanitarian law during the civil war. Visits by two UN special procedures also took place in the year: the Special Rapporteur on promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. In December, Sri Lanka signed and announced its intention to ratify the International Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances.

To recognise the significant advances made by the government of Sri Lanka, the EU Foreign Affairs Council adopted conclusions on Sri Lanka on 16 November 2015. The conclusions also expressed the EU's willingness to continue its close engagement with the government and support it in further progress to be made in areas such as accountability, reconciliation and human rights.

Despite the positive trends in 2015, reports of the continued use of torture, sexual harassment and exploitation as well as the use of disproportionate force against demonstrators by the police continued to emerge. Intimidation of victims' groups also remains a matter of concern. Bringing life back to normalcy in the north and east of the country after the end of the conflict six years ago, addressing the root causes of the past conflict, and ensuring accountability and reconciliation continue to be major challenges.

The NGO Secretariat which used to be under the purview of the Ministry of Defence is now attached to the Ministry of Social Dialogue. However, despite the high-level political will, the reform initially planned and the recommendations of the CSO advisory committee have yet to be implemented, and consequently the registration of CSOs remains a complex and time-consuming process.

The EU continued to support civil society in Sri Lanka through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the civil society organisations-local authorities (CSO-LA) budget lines. These projects focus mainly on women's empowerment, i.e. providing livelihood support, supporting political leadership, preventing sexual violence and providing counselling for trauma and other psychological disorders resulting from the conflict and other forms of structural violence, and on strengthening fundamental rights and promoting conflict-sensitive reporting and reconciliation.

Under the CSO-LA budget line, 17 projects have been financed. The projects focus predominantly on strengthening the role of CSOs in increasing the economic resilience of communities, fostering cooperation between CSOs and government authorities for better social services, enhancing CSOs' contribution to improving socio-economic opportunities and improving the living standards of war-affected communities in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, building inclusive civil society and governance for sustainable growth, supporting CSOs and LAs in order to integrate children with disabilities into Sri Lankan society, and ensuring the meaningful participation of plantation communities in democracy and governance.

Thailand

The nationwide imposition of martial law, which had been in place since 20 May 2014, was revoked on 1 April 2015. Martial law was replaced by National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) Order No 3/2015 issued under Section 44 of the interim constitution. The order essentially granted the authorities the same powers as martial law, and on 2 April the Spokesperson of the HR/VP stated that the replacement did not bring Thailand closer to democratic and accountable government.

Since the May 2014 coup, the military authorities have detained – usually for no more than seven days – more than 1 255 politicians, activists, journalists, and people whom it accused of not respecting NCPO orders, supporting the deposed government, disrespecting the monarchy, or being involved in anti-coup protests and activities. The use of military courts to try civilians is of particular concern. Civilians are referred to the military courts for charges such as terrorism, but also non-violent offences such as *lèse-majesté*. By 30 November 2015, at least 1 629 civilian individuals had been brought before military courts nationwide.

In September, the Ministry of Justice designated a military barracks as a detention facility for those suspected of committing national security offences. The use of a military barracks makes civilian oversight impossible and compromises access by families and lawyers. Two detainees have died there since September.

The military authorities have made the prosecution of persons for acts considered *lèse-majesté* under Article 112 of the Penal Code a top priority. Since the coup, at least 53 individuals have been charged with *lèse-majesté*. Military courts have routinely imposed harsher sentences than civilian courts, including a 60-year prison sentence, the highest ever.

The military authorities have regularly prohibited or disrupted public discussions of the political and human rights situation as well as the expression of differences in political opinions, alleging that these events threatened national security. Students, activists, academics, and other people have been intimidated by the military with personal visits being made to their residence and/or workplace, frequent phone calls or threats of legal prosecution. Journalists and politicians have been summoned after criticising the military authorities.

The NCPO bans political gatherings of more than five people. These protesters are often tried by military courts where they could face up to two years in prison. At least 80 people have been arrested for organising or taking part in public gatherings. This also makes it impossible for political parties to meet and formulate grievances or reform proposals, or for local communities to organise and demonstrate against projects affecting community rights.

Other human rights issues, unrelated to the coup, continue to be a cause for serious concern. Thailand was still on Tier 3 in the US Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report released in July 2015. There are around two to three million migrants from the neighbouring countries in Thailand. Tens of thousands of them are victims of trafficking.

Migrant workers, especially, are very vulnerable to abuses of human rights, specifically labour rights. A number of reports documenting such abuses in the fishing and seafood-processing industries, the poultry industry and tourism were published in 2015.

In the troubled deep south, the government continues to forcibly collect the DNA and fingerprints of those suspected of being involved in the insurgency in the deep south.

Throughout 2015, the EU Delegation engaged intensively with human rights defenders and included not only EU Member States but also like-minded countries in its efforts. With its wide range of activities, the EU Delegation has firmly established itself as a staunch defender of human rights, an approach that is widely and explicitly appreciated by the human rights community in Thailand. The EU raised with the Thai authorities the prevalence of forced labour, child labour and other unacceptable forms of work on fishing vessels in the Thai seafood processing industry as well as of trafficking in human beings, which is considered as requiring urgent and determined action. A dialogue was engaged between the EU and the Thai authorities as well as cooperation with the ILO to address the situation.

Two HR/VP Spokesperson statements were issued: on 2 April regarding the replacement of martial law by Order Number 3/2015 and on 10 July regarding Thailand's deportation of around 100 persons of Turkic origin. The Head of the Delegation together with the Heads of EU Missions in Thailand issued three statements: regarding detention without judicial overview and the use of military courts (13 February), regarding the arrests of 14 students on the basis of charges brought against them for peacefully demonstrating (30 June), and calling upon the Thai government to respect freedom of speech and assembly and underlining the importance of the rule of law and the protection and promotion of human rights for stability and progress (24 September).

On a very regular basis, the EU Delegation met bilaterally with human rights defenders and NGOs and it took part in the observation of trials where human rights were at stake. In addition to this, the EU Delegation organised field visits to vulnerable communities and meetings with human rights defenders for EU Member States and like-minded countries. The Delegation also took journalists to visit projects to raise awareness of the EU's support for non-state actors in Thailand.

The Delegation marked both the World Day against the Death Penalty and International Human Rights Day, with two public and highly visible events for which it obtained the cooperation of Thailand's Ministry of Justice.

Timor-Leste

The EU continued to support Timor-Leste in its drive to build a peaceful society and consolidate its young democratic system. Following the formation of the Sixth Constitutional Government in February 2015, the EU maintained regular contacts with the government through policy dialogue as well as high-level political meetings. However it was decided to defer the third enhanced political dialogue under Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement, which was originally planned to take place in autumn 2015, to the next year. In this context, the EU continued to closely follow up on commitments in areas such as human rights, rule of law, governance and the fight against corruption, agreed upon with Timor-Leste in the last political dialogue in 2014.

The EU Delegation is coordinating closely with Member States active in Timor-Leste as well as UN organisations to support human rights and the consolidation of democracy, notably through good governance programmes aiming to build capacity in the national parliament or to strengthen the justice sector. Assistance has also been provided for the establishment of an Audit Chamber, as well as measures to fight corruption, money laundering, organised crime and drug trafficking. A number of NGOs are supported with the aim of increasing access to justice, guaranteeing citizens' participation in the definition and monitoring of land and housing policies, and strengthening support and protection mechanisms for children and women who are victims of family violence.

Within the EU's Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, Timor-Leste was part of the second-generation pilot exercise on democracy support. A comprehensive Democracy Profile was finalised in 2015 to identify strategic priorities and will serve as a basis for the drawing up of a Democracy Action Plan consistent with the National Indicative Programme.

Vietnam

Despite continuous economic growth and improving socio-economic conditions for many, civil and political rights continued to be violated in Vietnam in 2015. Respect for and promotion of democratic principles and human and fundamental rights constitute an essential element of the EU-Vietnam Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) signed in June 2012. The EU's main concerns include civil and political rights, specifically freedom of expression and assembly, freedom of the media, freedom of religion or belief and the application of the death penalty. Human rights defenders continue to be intimidated, harassed and arrested, and often sentenced to long prison terms, although the number of arrests in 2015 decreased slightly, the number of cases of harassment increased.

On 19 January 2015 the fourth round of the enhanced human rights dialogue took place in Brussels. In March 2015, Vietnam ratified the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The year concluded with the fifth round of the enhanced human rights dialogue on 15 December, revealing in particular potential openings for EU support for legal reforms relevant to human rights and for the UNCAT implementation action plan.

At both human rights dialogues, as well as through public statements and discreet diplomacy, the EU urged the government to remove restrictions on freedom of expression and the media, requested prison visits and trial observation, and called for the release on humanitarian grounds of several imprisoned activists in a poor state of health. The EU repeatedly expressed its concerns about the harassment, arrest and sentencing of a number of lawyers, activists and bloggers, mostly on the basis of the Penal Code's national security provisions, and reiterated its calls for release of all imprisoned peaceful advocates of human rights in the country.

Following the attack on three human rights defenders in early December, the EU sent a verbal note to the authorities asking for clarification and for the prosecution of the perpetrators. The arrest of lawyer Nguyen Van Dai (who was among those attacked earlier) on 16 December drew a strong EU response, including a statement by the HR/VP's spokesperson on 18 December.

The EU's encouragement (and that of other like-minded countries) for Vietnam to move towards the abolition of the death penalty is gradually bearing fruit, as the number of crimes subject to capital punishment was further reduced in the revised Criminal Law adopted in November. However, the controversial national security provisions remain in the revised law and in some cases have been widened. The strengthening of the rights of detainees in the new laws on detention and criminal procedure are a positive response to the EU's call to bring legislation into line with international human rights standards.

On 12 May, the European Commission (DG Trade) held a roundtable in which representatives from the European institutions and from different non-state and international organisations exchanged views with interested EU stakeholders on trade, sustainable development and human rights in EU-Vietnam relations.

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on 17 December 'on the draft Council decision on the conclusion, on behalf of the Union, of the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Partnership and Cooperation between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, of the other part', in which a number of human rights concerns were raised.

The EU also regularly met with human rights activists and civil society organisations. It also monitored developments with respect to freedom of religion or belief, which remains a concern. Unfortunately, in 2015, requests to visit persons of concern in prison were not accepted by the authorities. The EU also met with the Ministry of Public Security to express its concern at the harassment and violence directed against human rights activists.

Following the 2014 Universal Periodic Review (UPR), in August 2015 Vietnam presented a draft UPR Action Plan with a roadmap for implementation of the 182 accepted recommendations (out of 227). The EU played an active role in the UPR process and its follow-up and offered support to Vietnam in the implementation of the roadmap. The EU persistently encouraged Vietnam to continue cooperation with the UN Human Rights Council special procedures and at the fifth human rights dialogue Vietnam also announced its intention to invite the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food in 2016. Still on multilateral issues, Vietnam supported the Human Rights Council's resolution on sexual orientation.

On the occasion of PM Dung's visit to Brussels, the financing agreement for a new EUR 14 million programme in the justice sector was signed. The main objective is to improve access to justice for the people of Vietnam, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable groups (women, children and ethnic minorities). The programme will support the Ministry of Justice in implementing its sector reform plans and CSOs in playing a more important role in promoting access to justice for the poor.

The EIDHR supported eight projects covering a broad range of areas, including LGTBI issues, ethnic minorities (focusing on women, children and land rights), religious freedom, and workers' rights and labour relations. Eleven projects under the NSA allocation aim, in particular, to strengthen CSOs' capacity (in areas such as health care, rural communities, sustainable agriculture, female migrant workers and local governance). In the framework of the Strategic Dialogue Facility, the EU also supported activities in the areas of anti-corruption, the rights of persons belonging to ethnic minorities, freedom of religion or belief, governance and migration.

VIII. Oceania

Australia

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Australia took place on 9 November 2015. Australia received 290 recommendations in total. Australia was commended, among other things, for its appointment of a full-time Human Rights Commissioner, efforts taken towards gender equality and upholding the rights of persons with disabilities. At the same time, many delegations encouraged Australia to review its detention and asylum policies, to close the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples and to ratify a number of key international human rights instruments, including the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture. Violence against women remains an issue; the Australian government announced additional measures to provide a safety net for women and children at high risk.

The EU, through its dialogues (on security, counter-terrorism and migration), engages with Australia on questions pertaining to migration policies as well as countering radicalisation and terrorism.

The EU-Australia Framework Agreement, initialled in March 2015, will provide opportunities to further enhance dialogue and cooperation on human rights issues. In 2015, the EU and Australia agreed to maintain regular formal exchanges on International Human Rights issues.

Fiji

On 17 September 2014, Fiji held its first democratic elections since the 2006 military coup. Following the elections, the EU discontinued measures under Article 96 of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement and resumed development cooperation with Fiji in 2015. During the year the EU continued to support Fiji's return to democracy by providing assistance to the new parliament.

The first high-level political dialogue under Article 8 of the ACP-EU Partnership Agreement since Fiji's return to democracy was held in Suva on 15 June 2015 and covered discussion on human rights issues. The meeting was chaired on the Fijian side by Prime Minister Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, and on behalf of the EU HR/VP Mogherini by Edgars Rinkēvičs, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Latvia.

Fiji underwent its second Universal Periodic Review (UPR) before the Human Rights Council in Geneva at the end of October 2014, with the final report of the Working Group issued in March 2015. Fiji accepted 112 recommendations and noted 26 out of a total of 138 recommendations. Fiji informed the Council that 12 are already being implemented.

Fiji is party to a number of international human rights conventions. However, it has not yet ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) or the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), despite accepting UPR recommendations in this regard. In March 2015 the parliament approved ratification of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; however, the convention has not been ratified yet.

During the year, the ILO continued to assess Fiji's progress in bringing its legislation into line with the core ILO Conventions 87 and 98. The Employment Relations Amendment Bill 2015 repealed the Essential National Industries Decree; the remaining shortcomings will be examined by the ILO tripartite mission at the beginning of 2016.

There have been mixed developments concerning past allegations of torture and ill-treatment of suspects and prisoners by the Fijian security forces. Police Commissioner Groenewald took determined steps to push investigations forward, but resigned in November 2015 due to alleged interference from the military. Substantial progress in trials of torture cases needs to be demonstrated to send a clear signal that the culture of impunity has no place in a democratic society.

The re-established Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission (HRADC) continued to operate under a restrictive 2009 decree. The appointment of the new commissioners in spring 2015 was a positive step forward in strengthening compliance with human rights in Fiji. During the year the HRADC received close to 300 complaints which concerned access to services, such as electricity and water, violence against women, climate change and alleged brutality and torture by police and prison officers.

The government is currently involved in many awareness campaigns on violence against women and children. The UN reported that 64 % of women in Fiji have faced some form of violence in their lifetime (in spite of the high rate, it remains one of the lowest in the South Pacific). About 15 % of women also reported being abused during their pregnancy. The European Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica, held a dedicated meeting on gender issues with five NGOs in Suva in June 2015, thus confirming the importance of consultation and CSO dialogue for the EU.

Fiji hosted the Pacific UN Free & Equal campaign from June to August of 2015. The campaign targeted homophobia, transphobia and discrimination against the LGBTI community.

In 2015, the EU has continued its support for CSOs and started the implementation of the Fiji roadmap for engagement with civil society. Consultation with CSOs took place in the context of the preparation of Fiji's 11th EDF programmes on justice and agriculture. In both sectors, civil society organisations will be involved in regular dialogue and the implementation of specific activities. The EU-funded Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Fiji Initiative has also worked with over 40 CSOs and community groups to advocate and promote citizen engagement on key issues such as accountability and human rights, transformative leadership, equitable service delivery, non-discrimination, decision making and coalition building.

By the end of 2015, EUR 2.4 million (under the EIDHR and NSA allocations) had been devoted to six new projects to consolidate participatory democracy, in particular with the objectives of improving governance and accountability through inclusive policy making by creating an enabling environment for CSOs to engage with public authorities, and supporting CSOs' role in promoting democracy and sustainable development by enhancing their oversight functions (monitoring and reporting) in support of the relevant national processes.

Small Pacific Island States – Kiribati, Republic of Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Tuvalu and Samoa

Four countries were under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2015: the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Kiribati and the Federated States of Micronesia and Nauru. Samoa and Palau will be reviewed in 2016.

In March 2015, the Republic of the Marshall Islands ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In October 2015, Kiribati and the Federated States of Micronesia ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. However, the Pacific region continues to have the lowest treaty ratification record, largely due to limited capacity. Furthermore, Pacific Island States have long experienced challenges with treaty reporting. To address these issues the EU is supporting the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat in increasing the rate of the Pacific Islands' ratification and implementation of international human rights treaties in a regional programme project with a budget of EUR 1 million.

With the exception of Samoa and Fiji, none of the Pacific Island States have national human rights institutions, which hinders national protection of human rights in the Pacific. In 2015, the Office of the Ombudsman in Samoa released a first ever report on the state of human rights in Samoa. The report recognised the need for better safeguards for equality and respect for women, children, persons with disabilities and prisoners.

Violence against women and children continues to be a major issue in the Pacific. Countries need to step up the implementation of their national strategies and enforcement of domestic violence legislation.

The situation of asylum seekers and refugees in Nauru remained worrying. The United Nations Sub-committee on Prevention of Torture visited Nauru in May 2015 and called on the authorities to set up an independent monitoring body to ensure that the country meets its obligations to treat people in detention in line with the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

The human rights situation in Nauru was a matter of concern. In early May 2015, the government of Nauru took measures to restrict access to the internet and social media, including Facebook.

Moreover, it passed amendments to the Criminal Code that made any comment deemed 'to cause emotional stress' and 'likely to threaten public order' an offence punishable with up to seven years in prison. The amendment has been largely criticised by international media as an attempt to restrain freedom of speech. In addition, several opposition Members of Parliament face ongoing court cases and their lawyers have reported restrictions on access to the country. The EU Delegation closely observed the deteriorating political and human rights situation in Nauru and in June 2015 issued a statement in this regard. Several missions were carried out to Nauru to assess the situation on the ground.

Climate change remains one of the biggest challenges for the Pacific Island States, which impacts on human rights, the prevailing violence and discrimination against women, access to healthcare and high school dropout rates. In 2015, Tuvalu was hit by Tropical Cyclone Pam and the Federated States of Micronesia was hit by Tropical Cyclone Maysak.

Representatives from Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu participated in a workshop on foreign employment research and promotion which was funded by the European Union through the Pacific Climate Change and Migration (PCCM) project.

Through the dialogue with the countries and through different financial instruments, the EU promoted human rights, gender equality and the increased participation of women in decision making. Representatives from the LGBTI community in the Pacific Island States participated in two workshops hosted by the EU Delegation for the Pacific as part of the UN Free & Equal campaign launch in Suva in July 2015. The workshops aimed to raise awareness of human rights monitoring mechanisms, focusing on violations against people based on their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or intersex status.

Bilateral meetings at various levels were used as a platform to promote respect for human rights and gender equality in the Pacific region. Local-level political dialogues took place in Nauru, Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and Kiribati. In September, European Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development Neven Mimica discussed human rights issues with several Pacific leaders at the 46th Pacific Islands Forum summit in Port Moresby. The EU is supporting the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat in increasing the rate of the Pacific Islands' ratification and implementation of international human rights treaties in a regional project with a budget of EUR 1 million.

The EU Delegation carried out demarches and outreach activities inviting the Pacific Island States to support EU human rights initiatives and priorities at the UN level. In October 2015, the Delegation issued press releases welcoming the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict by Kiribati and the Federated States of Micronesia.

New Zealand

Following the recommendations of the UPR in 2014, the New Zealand government has adopted legislation to address the prevention of torture and ill-treatment (notably through the Vulnerable Children Act) and cyberbullying (Harmful Digital Communication Act). The New Zealand government has acknowledged the need to prioritise child poverty, family violence and gender issues (gender pay gap, prevention of violence against women). Maori continue to be disproportionately represented in the statistics for imprisonment and youth suicide.

The EU and New Zealand continued to hold regular human rights consultations in international fora, including at the UN in New York and Geneva. The EU and New Zealand have cooperated very closely within the framework of the UNSC.

The EU-New Zealand Partnership Agreement on Relations and Cooperation was initialled in March 2015 and will, among other things, provide opportunities to further enhance dialogue and step up cooperation on human rights issues.

Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea (PNG) has had a democratic system of government since its independence in 1975. In 2015, the country celebrated the 40th anniversary of its independence. Papua New Guinea has recently upgraded to a lower-middle-income developing country which is experiencing significant economic growth and a vibrant social transformation over the last decade. The judiciary is independent and the PNG press is free – both are functioning relatively well. However, governance, transparency and human rights issues tarnish the country's profile.

It is widely acknowledged that gender-based violence continues to be a scourge across PNG society – in particular violence against women and children and sorcery-related torture and killings. The number of incidents of rape and intimate-partner violence is one of the world's highest. The government has developed policies to address the issue, such as the 2013 Family Protection Act – although its implementation is still weak – and international development partners are actively providing support and funding. However, there is still much to be done to reach remote areas and change behaviour patterns.

In May 2013, amendments to the Criminal Code resulted in an increasing number of crimes subject to the death penalty – such as treason, piracy and attempted piracy with violence – and marked an alarming step back in the field of human rights. 2014 was marked by discussions on new modes of execution (electrocution, firing squad, lethal injection with deprivation of oxygen, or lethal injection with anaesthetic), which were endorsed by the National Executive Council in 2015. Nevertheless, the moratorium on the death penalty has not been broken; the last execution dates back to 1954. On a more positive note, the prime minister recently made some public statements concerning a possible review. The official position, however, remains unchanged.

Reliable data indicate a serious level of corruption (ranked 145th out of 177 in the Corruption Perception Index 2014), the lack of a legal framework and accountability and oversight mechanisms (141st out of 189 in the Doing Business Report 2015), insufficient and inefficient delivery of services (158th out of 186 in the Human Development Index), and non-achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Corruption is perceived as endemic and spread across the country. This situation is widely recognised by the government, which has taken some positive steps to address it.

In July 2015, the National Executive Council endorsed the Papua New Guinea Sovereign Wealth Fund (PNG SWF), which aims to ensure responsible management of revenue from mining and petroleum. The initiative is seen as a promising step towards ensuring that part of the mineral and petroleum rents are set aside for the benefit of future generations and for macro-economic stability. Mining and petroleum tax revenues and dividends are expected to flow into the newly established SWF as from the first quarter of 2016. However, questions on the SWF's governance structure and operations remain.

The EU is actively contributing to combating violence against women through education, awareness raising, and legislative and policy initiatives. In 2015, a new project under the EIDHR was identified: 'Addressing Violence Against Women in Papua New Guinea' (EUR 277 999), implemented by Voluntary Service Overseas together with a local partner, Madang Country Women's Association Inc. The project aims to increase awareness of the adverse effects of gender-based violence and promote the rights of women and girls. It also provides paralegal advice and counselling, referral pathways for victims/survivors of gender-based violence and reintegration of victims back into the community.

Two projects identified under the EIDHR in 2014 have continued. The first is 'Papua New Guinea Leadership against Gender-Based Violence' (EUR 278 000, November 2014-November 2016). The project, implemented by World Vision, aims to uphold the rights of women in Papua New Guinea and target leaders and decision makers at the highest level of government, churches, communities and civil society organisations. The second is 'Supporting Human Rights and their defenders where they are most at risk' (EUR 1 080 000). A grant was awarded to Child Fund Papua New Guinea in December 2014, with a duration of 36 months. The project aims to empower survivors and human rights defenders.

The EU has been supporting an innovative approach to promote democracy and governance through the 'Open Parliament' project (EUR 288 000) over the last two years. The project, implemented by Transparency International, is intended to support the Office of the Speaker of Parliament and the PNG National Parliament in building the Parliament's data, website and SMS link, thus enhancing interaction between the parliament and citizens. The EU funding came to an end in December 2015. At a ceremony held on 15 December 2015, the implementing agency, Transparency International, officially handed over the project to the national parliament. The Office of the Speaker and the national parliament will continue to sustain the project and implement it using other sources of funding.

Finally, the EU is actively engaged in increasing the effectiveness of European public diplomacy through dialogue and exchange. In Papua New Guinea, the EU delivers EU demarches on human rights and is developing close links through a continuous dialogue with authorities and partners alike. The mainstreaming of governance, human rights and gender issues is also targeted through every cooperation project managed by the Delegation.

Solomon Islands

Political instability in the Solomon Islands continues. The opposition put forward another motion of no confidence in October 2015 following concerns about alleged misuse of funds by the prime minister. The motion was withdrawn following a substantial reshuffle of ministers. Given the system's fragility and the interests at stake, further instability can be expected, which could create momentum for the government to reform the electoral and political environment.

The engagement and participation of women in political life continues to be very low. The Political Parties Integrity Act, drafting of which was helped by EU-supported technical assistance, requires registered political parties to have at least 10 % women among their total number of candidates. Along with other donors, the EU is supporting further reforms to the Electoral and the Political Parties Integrity Acts with a view to addressing current weaknesses, notably on gender mainstreaming. In line with recent announcements by the PM, the introduction of temporary special measures is expected to be a key element of those reforms, the success of which may be jeopardised by the political instability.

The EU Delegation has provided assistance to the electoral and political reforms and continued to support the fight against gender inequalities, including gender-based violence and women's empowerment, and violence against children. The programming of the 11th EDF was finalised in 2015, covering the period up to 2020.

High levels of domestic and gender-based violence continue to plague the country. Gender-based violence against women and children (age group 15-49) is persistently high (estimated at 64 % for partnered women and 37 % for non-partnered). The judiciary is taking a firmer stand on this issue now. The Family Protection Act of 2014 aimed to establish preventive measures to stop violent behaviour against vulnerable members of families. However, the implementing regulations have still not been finalised and enforcement of the act is still not ensured. The act is a mixture of criminal and civil law, criminalising behaviours relating to domestic violence, and also providing civil remedies to protect victims.

The Solomon Islands government ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1995. The government is due to submit its second and third country reports on the implementation of the convention. A Child Rights Bill and a Child Protection Bill have been drafted but not yet adopted. They aim to protect and support victims of violence, not to punish offenders. Offenders convicted of violence against children are dealt with under the Penal Code.

The Solomon Islands committed to seven human rights obligations under CEDAW in 2002 but is having difficulties in complying with the related reporting obligations. The country also lacks an implementation strategy. The next reporting is due in 2018. The Solomon Islands has signed the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court; however, it has yet to be ratified.

A national consultation of government officials took place in May 2015 within the framework of the upcoming Universal Periodic Review (UPR). CSOs and local authorities were also consulted. The first review was held in 2011. Out of 115 recommendations, the government accepted 112. The second cycle for the UPR will be presented in Geneva on 25 January 2016.

Following the fifth political dialogue in 2014, the next is scheduled to take place at the end of the first semester in 2016 and will again address issues relating to human rights.

The Solomon Islands has no formal instrument for the protection and defence of human rights. The police are often poorly trained and unaware of human rights and relevant legislation and civil society, as the watchdog of the policies, has limited reach and capacity on these issues. In 2016 the EU is launching a programme to enhance CSOs' capacities to participate in policy dialogue and monitoring and to effectively advocate for inclusive and sustainable growth.

The EU Delegation has continued a dialogue on corruption with civil society organisations and with the ombudsman on human rights issues. Corruption, particularly among high-ranking politicians, remains a serious problem. In addition, the EU has called for more progress in transparency and accountability of all public spending, notably including the Constituency Development Funds, which make up a large part of the development budget.

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission report was due to have been presented to the parliament in 2015 but this has not taken place and the recommendations have not yet been implemented, despite the government's promises.

Under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), in 2015 the EU Delegation launched a call for proposals to support initiatives and actions on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, including prevention through awareness-raising campaigns promoting children's education on all forms of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. The goals of the project also included promoting the physical and/or psychological healing and social reintegration of children who are victims of abuse, facilitating the ending of impunity for all crimes of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation against children by bringing perpetrators to justice and publicising the penalties of such crimes. The EU Delegation has also continued to closely follow the implementation of the EU-funded projects on women's rights, violence against women, and women's empowerment and participation, together with other international organisations and actors.

Tonga

Tonga was last reviewed under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2013. The country accepted a total of 66 recommendations and rejected 22. The rejected recommendations concerned abolishing the death penalty, granting rights to LGBTI persons, advancing towards ratifying the ICCPR, abolishing corporal punishment and ratifying the CEDAW. Tonga extended a standing invitation to UN special procedures in January 2013 but no UN special procedures have visited the country to date.

In March 2014, the Tongan government organised a consultation to discuss the implementation of the outstanding UPR recommendations. Following the consultation, Tonga worked towards developing a common core document and establishing a National Human Rights Coordination Committee. The consultation was funded by the EU.

Tonga held its second democratic elections on 27 November 2014. The first elections, held in 2010, marked the introduction of a number of constitutional reforms and for the first time, a majority of 17 out of the 26 seats of the Tongan Parliament were determined by universal suffrage. The representatives of the nobility select their own 9 members of parliament. The lack of female participation in Tongan politics remains a weakness. None of the 16 female candidates were elected as MPs in spite of national and international efforts undertaken to promote female candidates during the year.

In 2015, 'Akilisi Pohiva took office as the first commoner Prime Minister of Tonga. He has sworn to promote good governance, fight corruption, initiate electoral reforms and strengthen the rule of law and protection for human rights. In 2015, the new government of Tonga announced its intention to ratify CEDAW. This announcement was met with strong resistance, mainly from the nobility and the Catholic Church.

In 2015, Tonga hosted the first ever Pacific Human Rights Conference on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, connecting groups from across the Pacific region and educating activists on international human rights law, recent international developments and agreed principles such as the Yogyakarta Principles.

Representatives from Tonga's LGBTI community participated in two workshops hosted by the EU Delegation for the Pacific as part of the UN Free & Equal campaign launch in Suva in July 2015. The workshops aimed to raise awareness of human rights monitoring mechanisms, focusing on violations against people based on their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or intersex status.

The EU is supporting the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat in increasing the rate of the Pacific Islands' ratification and implementation of international human rights treaties in a regional project with a budget of EUR 1 million. Under this project, the Pacific Regional Rights Resource Team of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community has implemented a range of activities towards ratification of the CEDAW and overdue reporting on CRC in Tonga. The project has also worked through the Women's Division in the Ministry of Internal Affairs to provide technical support on the development of strategic plans for implementation of the Family Protection Act (2014) and the revised Gender Policy, as well as to roll out a series of community consultations on the protections and redress offered under the new act. In addition, a National Indicative Programme under the 11th EDF was signed with Tonga in 2015 and provides for EUR 0.6 million for CSOs in Tonga. Additional support is envisaged to ensure more engagement of CSOs in the policy dialogue and monitoring.

Vanuatu

Vanuatu made substantial progress towards meeting the objectives of the human rights country strategy. Vanuatu is the country in the Pacific with most UN conventions ratified. Positive achievements noted by the EU Delegation included: accession to the Convention against Torture, the Rome Statute of the ICC, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UN Convention against Corruption; measures taken to promote gender equality and women's participation in municipal councils; the establishment of Family Protection Units; the 'No Drop' policy concerning sexual offences and domestic violence; the free and fair elections held in 2012; and the appointment in February 2013 of an interim national human rights committee.

That said, although legal frameworks related to UN conventions are in place, many shortcomings remain in their implementation due to the weak capacities of most public institutions.

The judiciary enjoys a high level of independence. The Supreme Court is often requested to decide cases between opposed political parties/politicians and does so with a good degree of independence. On 9 October 2015, the Supreme Court of Vanuatu found 14 MPs, including the Speaker of Parliament, deputy PM and four ministers, guilty of bribery and corruption under the Penal Code Act and sentenced them to three or four years in prison.

Vanuatu has successfully completed the second cycle review under the Human Rights Council UPR and is additionally developing a national framework under which the recommendations will be mainstreamed into government planning and development programs. These are to protect the most vulnerable people – women, children and those with a disability. Vanuatu launched the National Implementation Action Plan for the recommendations that were accepted in June 2014.

Vanuatu approved the establishment of a national human rights committee and instructed the State Law Office to draft the order appointing it. The main functions of this Committee are to advise the government on international human rights treaties; to advise the government on whether Vanuatu should become a State Party to an international human rights treaty; and to implement, and ensure that the government complies with, the international human rights treaties which Vanuatu has ratified in order to ensure that the government's human rights laws and policies meet its international human rights obligations. The NHRC comprises eight members – representing the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Justice and Community Services, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Management, the State Law Office, the Vanuatu Law Commission, civil society and the Malvatumauri Council of Chiefs – and works with existing mechanisms to promote human rights and establish the relevant working groups and sub-committees to achieve its mandate.

Vanuatu is still recovering from the worst weather disaster ever recorded in the Pacific. In March 2015, tropical cyclone (TC) Pam destroyed homes and crops and contaminated water supplies. Recovery efforts are further exacerbated by extreme drought caused by the El Niño phenomenon at the end of the year. According to the OCHA weekly report on the El Niño situation in the Pacific region, 90 000 persons in Vanuatu are being targeted for food distribution, especially those living in areas recovering from TC Pam.

Current reports by the UN and international aid organisations note that approximately 4 000 people have found refuge in 39 evacuation centres in Efate. In the capital city, Port Vila, approximately 90 % of housing has been seriously damaged. There are concerns over the conditions in evacuation centres, which reportedly vary enormously, with overcrowding, privacy and security identified as serious issues. There is a high risk of sexual violence against women and girls, as lighting is lacking in most of the centres.

During the third enhanced EU-Vanuatu political dialogue held in Port Vila on 30 October 2014, Vanuatu reaffirmed its continued adherence to the fundamental values of human rights, democracy, the rule of law and good governance. The EU welcomed the commitment of Vanuatu to advancing its human rights agenda and congratulated Vanuatu for the good preparation for the second Universal Periodic Review. Regarding the rule of law, Vanuatu's commitment to setting up a specific justice system for minors was particularly highlighted. The EU trusts that further initiatives will be carried out to improve the functioning of Vanuatu's courts and the smooth processing of lawsuits. The EU encouraged Vanuatu to pursue its efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, and to fight gender-based and sexual violence, as well as violence against children. Vanuatu re-affirmed its commitment to supporting the UNGA resolution for a moratorium on the death penalty.

Particular mention must be made of the role of the judicial sector in this year's political crisis. Fourteen MPs, including six ministers, were found guilty of bribery/corruption and eventually given prison sentences. Parliament was dissolved on 25 November 2015 by President Lonsdale and general elections have been called for 22 January 2016. The EU Delegation in the Solomon Islands will carry out a diplomatic watch together with EU Member States present locally (France and the UK) and with some non-EU missions on the spot (notably Australia and New Zealand).

Despite the Family Protection Act passed in 2008, which made domestic violence a crime, established mechanisms for protection of women in rural and remote areas and excluded the payment of a bride price as grounds for defence in domestic violence cases, violence against women and children is still very problematic in Vanuatu.

The national community-based rehabilitation (CBR) action plan 2014-2024 is to be utilised over a two-year period to strengthen CBR efforts in Vanuatu. Its review is planned for 2016

IX. The Americas

Antigua and Barbuda

The EU's human rights priorities in Antigua and Barbuda include the rights of women and children, and particularly combating domestic violence and child abuse; tackling discrimination against LGBTI persons; the very poor prison conditions; and the excessive use of force by law enforcement officials. In 2015, the EU continued to call for the repeal of the death penalty, currently under a de facto moratorium. A new call for proposals to tackle domestic violence was launched under the EIDHR. Implementation of a project benefiting Antigua, among other Eastern Caribbean countries, will start in 2016. Outreach has also been carried out in the context of the UNGA Third Committee, including at ministerial level.

Violence against women, including spousal abuse, continued to be a problem in 2015. The law prohibits and provides penalties for domestic violence, but some women are reluctant to testify against their abusers due to fear of stigma, retribution, or further violence. Child abuse also remained a serious issue, specifically neglect and physical abuse. Some public outreach on detection and prevention continued during the year. Reported cases were handled by a family court, which enabled faster prosecution. Specific legislation safeguarding LGBTI rights is still lacking. Although the legal provisions are not strictly enforced, consensual same-sex sexual activity for both sexes remains illegal. The country's prison conditions continue to be arguably the worst in the Eastern Caribbean, marked by extreme overcrowding. In June 2015, the single prison, designed to hold a maximum of 150 inmates, held a total of 373 prisoners, of whom 358 were male and 15 female.

In late 2015, the corruption scandal involving Antigua and Barbuda's former ambassador to the United Nations John Ashe led to calls for a reform of campaign financing laws. Migration irregularities and corruption cases also made the headlines in 2015. Fourteen Syrian asylum seekers requested refugee status, following their arrest and exoneration after being accused of being part of a smuggling ring. The refugees were released into the custody of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCHR). Against this background, the Attorney General was relieved of the immigration portfolio.

Argentina

The EU's human rights objective in the context of its relations with Argentina is to make optimal use of the instruments available for bilateral cooperation (political dialogue and EU-funded cooperation), maximising their efficient use and targeting them to the local situation.

The constitutional reform of 1994 gave constitutional status to the main international human rights conventions signed by Argentina. However, a number of challenges remain, in particular in prison conditions, violence against women (and the impact on children), human trafficking and the rights of persons belonging to minorities, notably indigenous communities. Despite the constant decrease in poverty and unemployment levels in recent years, the number of informal workers, and social inequalities, continue to be at worrying levels and risk increasing due to the current stagnation of the economy.

Ongoing EU projects tackle challenges including the promotion of the rights, and access to justice, of people affected by HIV/AIDS, the fight against impunity and the role of civil society, access to justice for vulnerable groups and the defence of the rights of indigenous communities in rural areas. Other projects have already been selected and focus on gender-based violence, institutional violence, police practices, detention centres and women's rights in rural areas. The regular human rights dialogue between the EU and Argentina is expected to take place in early 2016.

Commonwealth of the Bahamas

The EU's human rights priorities for The Bahamas focus on the abolition of the death penalty, improving conditions in detention centres, promoting women's rights and protecting them against gender-based violence, and ensuring the rights of immigrants, in particular from Haiti. The EU addressed these priorities and ensured follow-up to the UPR through the regular political dialogue in October 2015.

The government of The Bahamas intends to accede to all the major human rights instruments in the context of the government's law reform priorities. In September 2015, The Bahamas ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. During the year, the government of The Bahamas made an, ultimately unsuccessful, bid to join the UN's Human Rights Council in 2015.

The Bahamian authorities retain capital punishment and consider the death penalty an effective deterrent to crime. One person remains on death row. The current legislation equates to a de facto moratorium on the death penalty, as the right to appeal to the UK Privy Council prevents implementation of death sentences. The Bahamas has one of the highest rates of reported rape per capita, and gender-based violence seems widespread. However, throughout 2015 the government has facilitated an outreach programme to highlight the issue in the Bahamas. Conditions of detention remain a cause for concern.

The Bahamas lacks a comprehensive assessment and national plan of action to effectively combat human trafficking, while its restrictive immigration policy has been criticised for leading to the criminalisation and expedited deportation of possible victims. Up to 50 000 people of Haitian origin are denied Bahamian nationality, including many who were born and raised in The Bahamas. As a result of a more stringent immigration policy, a series of raids were undertaken that led to the apprehension and detention of irregular migrants, including children. In response to the reaction which this provoked, the government promised greater access and transparency and gave the local UNHCR office some access to the detention centres.

A referendum and parliamentary vote needed to pass four constitutional amendments on gender equality were postponed again in 2015. With respect to the setting up of a National Human Rights Institution as recommended by the UPR, The Bahamas was reviewing the experience of third countries in 2015.

Barbados

The main challenges include the abolition of the death penalty, the promotion of women's and children's rights, countering domestic violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, improving prison conditions and strengthening the judicial system. Excessive use of force by police and corporal punishment remain important challenges. These issues have been repeatedly raised by the EU Delegation in dialogue with the authorities. Formal demarches on human rights issues have been carried out in the context of the UNGA Third Committee.

The dialogue on the death penalty continues. The government has taken steps to amend the Offences against the Person Act by removing the mandatory death sentence for murder. The draft legislation was introduced in parliament on 27 January 2015, but was still under discussion at the end of the year. As of October 2015, there were 13 men on death row.

The police reported a decrease in the number of domestic violence-related homicides. The authorities attributed the decline to domestic violence training for police officers and the establishment in 2013, with EU assistance, of the Family Conflict Intervention Unit of the Police Force. With regard to women's rights, and human rights issues in general, the authorities announced that a dedicated Human Rights Committee would be created by early 2016. Nevertheless, violence and abuse remain significant problems, both for women and for children. The Bureau of Gender Affairs cited a lack of specific information and inadequate mechanisms for collecting and evaluating data on incidents of domestic violence as major impediments to tackling gender-based violence. Barbados will benefit from two grants under the EIDHR programme to tackle domestic violence, with implementation starting in early 2016. The Child Care Board, on the responsibilities of which is to investigate cases of child abuse or child labour, is said to be understaffed. Corporal punishment is still administered in public schools. Barbados's Minister for Home Affairs said in November 2015 that the proposed New Juvenile Justice Bill will completely eliminate this practice.

The civil justice system experienced heavy backlogs. In October 2015, the Caribbean Court of Justice handed down a ruling in a case that began 27 years ago, criticising the judiciary of Barbados for the slow pace of delivering justice. The gay community continues to be harassed and stigmatised. However, there are more people speaking out in the media against this discrimination. In January 2015, the parliament passed the Prison Amendments Act, abolishing the use of corporal punishment in prisons.

Belize

The EU's human rights priorities for Belize included focusing on reducing lengthy periods of pre-trial detention, stopping the use of excessive force by the security forces, combating domestic violence and discrimination against women, and tackling child abuse. The EU also maintained its focus on combating human trafficking and discrimination based on sexual orientation. Belize retains the death penalty for murder and military offences; however, it is considered to be a de facto abolitionist state.

The UN Human Rights Council conducted its second UPR for Belize in 2013, and throughout 2015 the EU encouraged Belize to implement its recommendations. The EU again encouraged Belize to establish a National Human Rights Institution, urged it to revise the anti-sodomy legislation, and underlined the importance of combating gender-based violence. The EU also highlighted the importance of ratifying key human rights instruments and meeting the reporting requirements on those UN instruments which Belize has ratified. In 2015 the EU again championed the promotion and awareness of human rights issues through joint discussions with key civil society and interest groups as well as with the government. Human rights issues were a key agenda point in the second political dialogue between the EU and Belize under Article 8 of the Cotonou Partnership, which was held in April 2015.

In 2015, under the EIDHR, the EU signed a new contract with UNICEF geared towards creating an enabling environment for the protection of children from violence and abuse. This continues the EU's support for the all-important partnership with UNICEF on protecting children and mobilising civil society organisations and care-givers in Belize. The EU, also alongside UNICEF, continued to support the Productive Organisation for Women in Action (POWA) in its work on empowering women and girls, and on HIV prevention and fighting against HIV stigma and discrimination.

Bolivia

In its cooperation and dialogue with Bolivia on human rights and democracy, the EU focuses in particular on strengthening the rule of law and improving access to justice, protecting and enforcing the rights of indigenous peoples, and eliminating violence against women and children.

The EU continued to engage in human rights and democracy dialogue with Bolivia in various formats, including the joint working group on democracy and human rights, which met four times in 2015. The EU and Bolivia also discussed human rights priorities in the fifth EU-Bolivia high-level dialogue, where the EU reiterated the importance of justice reform, the role of civil society and commitments on minimum working age under ILO conventions. The EU has also monitored Bolivia's implementation of human rights conventions under the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP+). Bolivia is a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council for 2015-2017, and the EU Delegation and EU Member States conducted demarches on international human rights issues.

In March 2015, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted the outcome of the UPR of Bolivia. Bolivia accepted 178 of the 193 recommendations, and rejected 15 related to child labour, freedom of expression and the independence of the judiciary.

As regards financial cooperation, justice sector reform is one of the priority areas for the EU's bilateral development assistance to Bolivia in 2014-2016. In 2015, the EIDHR provided support for eliminating violence against women and strengthening access to justice, with a special focus on adolescents and persons deprived of liberty. New projects were launched at the end of the year on economic, social and cultural rights for women, elderly people and indigenous peoples, trafficking in human beings, access to justice, and LGBTI rights. In 2015, the EU and EU Member States continued pilot work to promote greater consistency in democracy support in Bolivia under the Agenda for Action on Democracy Support.

Brazil

Brazil has made important strides, in particular regarding the rights of the elderly, women, children and LGBTI persons, and with the implementation of a national programme on human rights defenders. However, Brazil still struggles with violations of the human rights of the aforementioned groups. In addition, Afro-Brazilians and indigenous peoples still face discrimination and exclusion. In September, the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues expressed concern over the rights of persons belonging to minorities. Likewise, in August, the UN Special Rapporteur on torture expressed concern over the fate of inmates in prisons and detention centres, labelling mistreatment as 'endemic'. On the positive side, Brazil remains a pioneer in the protection of online civil rights with the adoption of an 'Internet Civil Framework' Law, and a leader on internet governance at global level.

Significant institutional changes occurred during 2015 in Brazil, as a new Human Rights Minister was appointed in April and a ministerial reform in October saw the merger of the Human Rights, Racial Discrimination and Women's Rights Ministries into a single body. But major challenges remain. The Brazilian judicial system is often seen as inefficient and costly, which causes a significant number of human rights violations to be left unreported; these often involve the rights of the most vulnerable groups such as women, Afro-Brazilians, children and indigenous peoples. Arbitrary arrests and detentions still occur and Brazil remains among the countries with the highest indices of killings by police in the world. This is often the case where the military police are concerned, and the victims are often Afro-descendants.

A proposal to lower the age of criminal majority from 18 to 16 for certain offences has sparked controversy. Land rights of indigenous peoples continued to be challenged, especially by the proposed constitutional reform that looks to transfer authority to approve and demarcate indigenous lands from the executive to Congress. The situation also remains worrying as regards intimidation of and violence against indigenous leaders and journalists. During the year, there were several assassinations of indigenous leaders over land conflicts and of journalists covering corruption or organised crime. The response of the judiciary has not always been adequate, which reinforces the feeling of impunity. Forced evictions and relocations in Rio de Janeiro in view of the 2016 Olympics are also of concern.

The fifth EU-Brazil high-level dialogue on human rights took place in Brasilia on 17 September 2015, and was co-chaired by the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Human Rights, Stavros Lambrinidis. Human rights defenders, the rights of indigenous peoples, the prevention of and fight against torture, the rights of the child, adolescents and youth, human rights education, the rights of disabled people, and migration were among the issues addressed. An agreement was reached on the importance of continuing cooperation on human rights, including on freedom of expression and the safety of journalists, youth and racial discrimination. A civil society seminar took place back to back with the dialogue, for the first time with high-level Brazilian government engagement. Both sides also participated in a high-level joint seminar on business and human rights, where Brazil accepted EU support and expertise in developing a national action plan in the field.

The EU has several tools to support women, children, indigenous peoples and LGBTI persons in Brazil both at political dialogue level and through the use of specific instruments/programmes such as the EU Gender Action Plan (GAP), the EIDHR and sectoral dialogues. Several projects are ongoing and new ones started in 2015: EUR 2 million in support of women's rights, EUR 4.3 million for children's rights, EUR 0.7 million for indigenous rights and EUR 0.5 million for LGBTI rights.

Canada

Canada remains a strong supporter of human rights protection worldwide, with high standards and principled values comparable to those of the EU. Human rights are traditionally a central theme of Canadian foreign policy. The change in government, from Conservative to Liberal in October 2015, is expected to result in even greater emphasis on mainstreaming human rights in external relations and on promoting multilateralism.

The government reiterates its commitment to upholding the fundamental rights of all Canadians, wherever they are threatened, both at home and abroad. Canada is generally viewed as a strong proponent and positive model of human rights for the rest of the world. If any, human rights issues in Canada continue to concern mainly minority groups, and indigenous peoples in particular.

Throughout 2015, Canada continued to be active in international fora, notably the UN, but also regionally (in particular in the Americas) and bilaterally, in promoting human rights, including through its development aid instruments. Canada has pursued its stated human rights priorities, such as human rights in Iran, women's rights, children's rights, the rights of LGBTI persons, internet freedom and indigenous rights. On most of these issues, the EU and Canada continued close cooperation in multilateral fora such as the UN and the OSCE. The annual EU-Canada human rights consultations took place in March.

Before the general elections in October, internal developments related to human rights in Canada were largely similar to those in 2014. However, some positive developments took place on indigenous issues with the June 2015 release of a report on the legacy of Canada's residential school system in which thousands of indigenous children had died or suffered abuse over the decades. The last such school was closed only in 1996. On the other hand, the Conservative government's anti-terrorism legislation which entered into force in June 2015 was criticised by the UN Human Rights Committee for failing to provide sufficient safeguards to protect indigenous peoples' rights.

The main issues raised by the UN Human Rights Committee's sixth UPR report on Canada of July 2015 related to the situation of indigenous peoples in general, violence against women, and human rights-related aspects of the Anti-Terrorism Act. The UPR report also specifically raised the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women, calling for a national enquiry as 'indigenous women and girls are disproportionately affected by ... violence, homicides and disappearances'.

The Conservative government, whose mandate ended following the federal elections of October 2015, consistently criticised the UN for 'wasting its time' on Canada instead of focusing on what it said were other real trouble spots with egregious human rights breaches. Many of these issues are expected to be addressed differently by the Liberal government. The Liberal party campaigned on more engagement with 'the average Canadian' and civil society groups at all levels, with a view to changing Canada's image and reputation both domestically and internationally, including with regard to human rights. After taking office in November, the government confirmed its commitment to re-energise Canada in multilateral institutions, including through championing human rights, specifically mentioning the rights of women and refugees.

As a considerable policy change, the new government promised immediate action on the outstanding issue of the nearly 1 200 missing and murdered indigenous women. The notion of an enquiry had been consistently rejected by the previous government, which had argued that there were already a series of studies on the matter and that the government therefore preferred to move forward with criminal justice reforms to manage the problems of violence, and violence against women in particular. During a meeting with the leaders of five national indigenous groups in December, the prime minister announced the start of a process to establish the enquiry into the missing or murdered indigenous women and girls. The enquiry is expected to begin in 2016.

Regarding the human rights of refugees, the new government made a major contribution in relation to the international refugee and migration crisis with a commitment to accept at least 25 000 government-sponsored and 10 000 privately-sponsored Syrian refugees. It also devoted additional resources in order to accelerate the processing of the refugees, enabling the first 10 000 refugees to arrive before the end of 2015. However, on the legislative front, some issues related to the processing of refugees and claimants' access to health care, stemming from the introduction in 2012 of the Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act, remained unresolved.

Chile

Chile has ratified all the main international and regional human rights conventions and most of the optional protocols and has become party to the Rome Statute on the ICC. Chile cooperates well with the UN mechanisms, sends periodic reports to the treaty bodies and the Human Rights Council (Universal Periodic Review), and establishes interaction with the special procedures of the Human Rights Council. While the overall situation concerning human rights in Chile is good, issues of concern remain, related to the existence of gaps in social and economic rights (for instance the provision of equal and quality education for all), problems of inequality and discrimination (including against women, LGBTI persons and indigenous peoples), and the lack of standardised procedures in the treatment of detained persons.

The government, which took office in 2014, includes a series of structural reforms in its programme, placing citizens' rights and the eradication of inequalities at its core. The government's human rights agenda envisages a new human rights institutional framework; proposals to tackle what has been called a 'historic debt' to Chile's indigenous peoples; commitments in the field of women's rights; a broad discussion to approve a same-sex marriage law and the adoption of a law on gender identity; commitments concerning human rights violations during the military dictatorship; and a new constitution based on a fully democratic system which incorporates a complete and balanced catalogue of rights, duties and guarantees, in line with the rights established in the principles, declarations and conventions on human rights. Government authorities seem determined to advance with significant steps in the field of human rights, but it remains to be seen whether they will be able to implement their ambitious programme, given that some of the proposed measures are not consensual even within the governing Nueva Mayoría coalition (e.g. abortion or civil unions leading to same-sex marriage). Chile's membership of the Human Rights Council came to an end in 2014, but Chile has stressed that it will continue to pursue its efforts as an articulator of consensus within the Latin American and Caribbean Group (GRULAC).

Some of the main advances during 2015 include the promulgation on 8 March, International Women's Day, of the bill to create a Ministry for Women and Gender Equality; the promulgation in April of Chile's civil union agreement which legalises civil unions between cohabiting couples, whether homosexual or heterosexual, making Chile the seventh country in South America to establish such unions; and the approval by Congress of the bill which creates an Undersecretary for Human Rights.

EU actions to promote human rights dialogue and close cooperation with Chile on human rights issues continued in 2015, with a focus on gender equality, indigenous rights, LGBTI rights, actions to preserve memory from the 1973-90 military dictatorship and, as cross-cutting issues, the strengthening of civil society and cooperation in international fora. The sixth local EU-Chile human rights dialogue took place in Santiago in December, during which the issues of international cooperation, human rights institutions, civil society participation, indigenous peoples' rights, women's rights and gender equality, LGBTI rights, memory and future work perspectives were discussed. A consultation meeting with civil society was held in November, prior to the dialogue, and a follow-up de-briefing with civil society will be held in January 2016.

Through thematic line cooperation, the EU provided a total of EUR 1 151 000 to support projects in these areas. The main actions under implementation include the EU-UN Women Joint Agreement, aimed at promoting gender equality in Chile with a focus on leadership and women's participation in politics, economic empowerment and eradication of gender-based violence; EU-MOVILH/Triángulo, aimed at empowering civil society to monitor the situation of LGBTI rights in Chile and the implementation and operation of the Anti-Discrimination Law; and the EU-National Institute for Human Rights programme for the strengthening of civil society action in the field of human rights, which includes funding for micro-projects in the areas of LGBTI rights, memory and indigenous peoples' rights.

Colombia

The existence of an armed conflict and its links with drug trafficking and other forms of organised crime have created a difficult context, including with regard to human rights concerns. The main issues or groups on which EU action has been focused in Colombia reflect these circumstances: impunity, human rights defenders, women, peace and security, children and armed conflict, ethnic groups and minorities (indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians). The main concerns are the forced recruitment of children, sexual violence against women and girls, and threats and attacks against local community leaders, participants in land restitution processes and trade unionists. Forced disappearances in certain rural areas and corruption also persist. A shortage of reliable official statistics adds to the difficulty.

The situation in Colombia has been under preliminary investigation by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court since 2004. The office of the Prosecutor has declared its intention to continue monitoring and analysing the implementation of the Legal Framework for Peace and legislative and other developments regarding the investigation and prosecution of false positive cases (extrajudicial killings).

There are encouraging signs that Colombia is reinforcing its efforts to tackle impunity. In June 2015, Congress approved Legislative Act 01 of 2015 which amends Article 221 of the constitution regarding military tribunals. The law makes reference to international humanitarian law and provides that crimes that violate human rights which have not been committed within the context of the internal armed conflict will be subject to the jurisdiction of military courts.

Despite continuing concerns over the capacity of the government to adequately protect human rights defenders, there have been positive signs that human rights will be at the centre of peace-building efforts, including the recent publication of an annual report on human rights and a commitment to mainstreaming human rights into regional development plans. Furthermore, there have been a number of recent developments reflecting a trend in favour of civil liberties.

An eventual peace agreement with the FARC will have positive effects on the broad human rights agenda in Colombia, although many human rights-related problems will need several years of commitment to be addressed fully.

The technical human rights dialogue between the EU and Colombia took place in Bogota in June. The dialogue had been prepared closely with EU Member States locally and focused on opportunities and challenges within the following areas: business and human rights, gender, victims and the National Centre of Historical Memory.

Civil society organisations (organised in platforms) had also been consulted to give input on the agenda and substance. In the dialogue, the EU also expressed concern over threats to human rights defenders and stressed the importance of preventive and investigatory work to prosecute those responsible for crimes committed against them. EU Member States (10 present at the dialogue) participated actively with the EU Delegation, which resulted in both common ground and joint activities with Colombian counterparts.

The EU is supporting projects related to transparency and impunity, children and armed conflict in sensitive regions, women and armed conflict in terms of their role as peace-builders, and Afro-Colombian, indigenous and Mestizo communities in Chocó. The EU has also approved projects dealing with land restitution and human rights defenders.

Business and human rights became a priority over 2015 and will be added formally to the Country Strategy from 2016 onwards. The EU and its Member States, led by the UK and the Netherlands, worked with the government of Colombia on the National Action Plan for Business and Human Rights, which was launched on 9 December together with the annual report on human rights. The UK and the Netherlands also funded the Institute for Human Rights and Business. This matter has come to the fore as an issue of concern because the extractive industry is often associated with human rights violations for commercial interests and mining concessions are often granted within protected areas or areas subject to land restitution. 2015 marked the fourth year of the implementation of the law on victims (Law 1448), which concerns reparations to the victims of the armed conflict as well as measures to accelerate land restitutions.

Costa Rica

Costa Rica is a State Party to the principal international and inter-American human rights instruments. The headquarters of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights and the United Nations-mandated University for Peace are all located in Costa Rica. In June 2015, the former Vice-President of Costa Rica and several times minister, Elizabeth Odio Benito, was elected as a judge to the IACHR. Costa Rica has been an active and a constructive participant in the UN Human Rights Council and on all matters relating to human rights and international humanitarian law in the Third Committee. Building on its strong tradition and solid progress in the protection and promotion of human rights, Costa Rica has committed to promoting even more vigorous public policies on gender equality and greater participation by vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities, the elderly, people of African descent and indigenous people, at all levels of society. A significant step in the latter area was taken in August, when the Legislative Assembly unanimously approved a constitutional reform declaring Costa Rica a multi-ethnic and multicultural state, the outcome of more than 15 years of discussion.

Nevertheless, the levels of social inequality and inequity, as well as the worsening security situation and increasing presence of organised crime and drug trafficking in the region and the country itself, are important challenges. Ensuring safety and security as well as tackling impunity are major social and political priorities. Despite the progress reported in institutional strengthening and new policies, it is essential to continue and reinforce the efforts to address the conditions that undermine the fundamental rights of vulnerable groups (e.g. the prison population, migrants, indigenous peoples, women who are victims of violence and the LGBTI community).

During 2015, the EU remained an active and constructive partner of Costa Rica in the field of human rights. The EU Delegation and EU Member States present in the country engaged with all branches of government. In addition to specific demarches, the EU and its Member States participated in a number of public events and outreach activities and continued to implement a significant number of cooperation projects with a strong impact in the field of human rights. For instance, the EU programme PROSEC ('Sector support to security sector reform in Costa Rica'), supports the authorities' efforts to improve public security, particularly by contributing to improving the training of the police force and strengthening internal organisation.

Another significant EU-funded project is PROEDUCA ('Comprehensive Strategy to reduce school dropout rates in public secondary education'), which contributes to social cohesion by strengthening the capacities of institutional actors and of the educational community to fight against early secondary school leavers. The EU-funded project EMPRENDE ('Promote the entrepreneurial capacities of women to strengthen their economic independence') contributes to the implementation of greater social and territorial cohesion by increasing the economic independence of economically vulnerable women with entrepreneurial potential in rural or marginalised urban areas. As part of the new EIDHR call for proposals for 2015-16, the EU announced in 2015 that it will fund three projects to promote a more inclusive society and improve the human rights situation of migrants, women and young prison inmates in Costa Rica, including the LGBTI community.

Cuba

Arbitrary and short-term detentions of members of the opposition, activists and human rights defenders continued in 2015. Concerns were conveyed on various occasions to the Cuban authorities in the political dialogue at all levels. The EU and Member States regularly undertake public and digital diplomacy activities on freedom of expression. They have engaged in monitoring activities and reported on the use of short-term detentions and on violations of the freedom of association and assembly.

In 2015, the EU's human rights priorities vis-à-vis Cuba included emphasising the ratification of UN covenants on civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights, in particular non-discrimination and violence against women, freedom of expression and association, including more space for civil society activities, as well as freedom of movement. During 2015, the EU and Cuba continued their negotiations with a view to a bilateral Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA), which would establish an enabling platform for constructive dialogue and improved cooperation. The PDCA would provide for the establishment of a human rights dialogue and for cooperation in this field, reflecting the central place of human rights in EU-Cuba relations.

The first EU-Cuba human rights talks took place on 25 June 2015 in Brussels, co-chaired on the EU side by the EUSR for Human Rights, Stavros Lambrinidis and EEAS DSG Christian Leffler. The meeting was notable for both the openness of the exchanges and the broad range of topics that Cuba was willing to address. Cuba committed to pursuing future discussions with the EU on the basis of universally recognised human rights.

The EU in Havana continued to interact with a diverse range of Cuban civil society representatives in the Human Rights Working Group, coordinated by the EU Delegation, and through ad hoc meetings. These contacts contributed to the analysis and monitoring of the situation with respect, in particular, to freedom of expression and association, freedom of belief and labour rights. Open meetings with the more prominent critics of the government continued to be off-limits, in particular for EU and Member State Ministers and senior officials on official visits.

The EU continued to support projects in Cuba to strengthen the capacity of female entrepreneurs, to prevent violence against women, to strengthen the capacity of organisations representing people with disabilities, on sexual education, to support private initiative and entrepreneurship in urban development, agriculture and energy. The EU is undertaking a constant effort to expand the involvement of independent civil society organisations in both its political and cooperation work. The EU continued to engage with members of the group of former political prisoners released in 2011 ('the 75') to enquire about their legal situation and speak up to the authorities concerning their right to leave the country.

Dominica

In 2015, the EU continued to support the abolition of the death penalty, protection of children's and women's rights and tackling domestic violence and LGBTI discrimination. Several outreaches were undertaken in the context of the UNGA Third Committee on Human Rights resolutions. Dominican women enjoy the same legal rights as men, but property ownership continues to be deeded to heads of households, who are usually men. The government held workshops and participated in public awareness and outreach programmes concerning sexual and domestic violence. However, the country does not yet have a national action plan on gender-based violence. Dominica is among the countries which will benefit in 2016 from the implementation of a regional grant financed under the EIDHR with a focus on domestic violence.

Dominica was severely affected by the passage of Tropical Storm Erika in August 2015. The damage assessment report indicated that the destruction was equivalent to approximately 90 % of the country's GDP. The EU is mobilising a substantive allocation from the 11th European Development Fund to support the government in ensuring the population's access to basic services.

Dominican Republic

The EU's priorities on human rights and democracy in the context of its relations with the Dominican Republic include tackling gender-based violence; promoting respect for children's rights including tackling child labour and child trafficking and prostitution; promoting sexual and reproductive rights; tackling discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation; defending and promoting the rights of Haitian migrant workers and their descendants born in the Dominican Republic; and the rights of people with disabilities.

The Dominican Republic is a functioning democracy but there is widespread public mistrust of its institutions. Human rights are formally respected, and the relevant conventions have been ratified except those on migrant workers and their families, prevention of statelessness, the rights of children and the protection of persons from enforced disappearance. However, in practice, there are problems in the fields of gender, violence against women, domestic abuse, rape, discrimination against LGBTI persons, state violence, extrajudicial killings by security forces of mostly young and poor alleged delinquents, overcrowded and dangerously substandard prison conditions, arbitrary arrest and detention, lengthy pre-trial detention, weak rule of law and inadequate enforcement of labour laws. Accusations of corruption are frequent and impunity is prevalent. A recent ruling by the Constitutional Court has in effect taken abortion legislation back to the situation that prevailed in 1884, by prohibiting abortion even in cases of rape, incest or foetal deformity, or where the mother's life is endangered.

Following a Constitutional Tribunal ruling in 2013 which effectively stripped the descendants of irregular migrants of their Dominican nationality, unprecedented regularisation and naturalisation processes were launched in 2014. This has given rise to a series of problems, but the Dominican authorities have been generally cooperative in addressing the issues and in deploying efforts to comply with international standards when carrying out deportations of irregular migrants. The EU responded to the recurrent controversy in various ways in 2015, expressing concern, offering help and emphasising dialogue as well as continuing its support for human rights organisations through its cooperation instruments.

After a broad consultation process led by the General Directorate on Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and by the Interinstitutional Commission on Human Rights, the Dominican Republic finally prepared its National Plan on Human Rights for 2015-2020. The document was transmitted to the Office of the President for approval, but it is reportedly being held up due to the pressure exerted by the Church's top hierarchy against the protection of LGBTI rights. NGOs reported widespread discrimination in health care, education, justice, and employment and LGBTI individuals often faced intimidation, harassment, and bullying.

The EU has supported a large number of important initiatives in the field of human rights, public administration reform, and bilateral relations with Haiti. During 2015, the EU made a significant contribution to projects regarding the promotion and defence of human rights and human rights defenders in the Dominican Republic; women's rights, especially sexual and reproductive rights; and migration and nationality. In addition, the EU has been supporting work in the areas of governance and human rights.

Ecuador

Some political and legal developments in Ecuador over the last year represent challenges in certain areas of human rights. The most significant of them concern civil and political rights, especially in the area of fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. The new Communication Law has increased state control over the media. Other concerns include the independence of the judiciary and due process as well as shrinking space for civil society.

Indigenous peoples' organisations continue to be divided on state policies over national resources, especially on the new mining law and oil concessions. Consequently, social unrest and confrontations increased during the year. However, more positively, there has been some progress on the legal framework for women, children, asylum seekers and LGBTI persons.

The EU's objectives on human rights and democracy in the context of its relations with Ecuador include: promoting the legitimacy of the work of human rights defenders; encouraging the participation of civil society in public policies; supporting freedom of expression; and ensuring better protection of vulnerable groups including indigenous peoples and minorities, migrants, women and children.

Dialogue on human rights with Ecuador continued in 2015. The EU and EU Member States have been monitoring and reporting on the evolution of the human rights situation throughout the year. Regular and ad hoc meetings have been held with government counterparts, and also with human rights defenders and civil society organisations. The EU raised concerns about increasing limitations on the freedom of expression and association, the criminalisation of social protest, the independence of the judicial system and the shrinking space available to civil society.

Political demarches have been carried out to promote EU positions at the multilateral level. The EU and its Member States have organised and/or participated in various fora debating and promoting the role of civil society and the defence of democracy and human rights, for example in December 2015, in celebration of the International Day for Human Rights. The EU roadmap for engagement with civil society attracted increasing interest from civil society organisations, which are participating actively in its implementation. Despite the fact that bilateral cooperation funds have been decreasing in recent years, the EU and its Member States have continued to provide funds to support the EU's human rights priorities in the country.

El Salvador

The human rights record of El Salvador has continued to improve throughout 2015 despite worrying developments in the field of security. In March, voters elected their representatives to the Legislative Assembly, to the Central American Parliament and to municipal offices, in elections that complied with international standards. However, last-minute electoral changes and organisational problems led to a significant delay in the announcement of the results. There has been some interesting progress in the fight against corruption and illicit enrichment, although it remains unclear whether the country's institutions will be able to deal with the breadth of the problem and bring investigations to fruition.

The outcome of El Salvador's UPR, adopted in March 2015, was rather positive. Recommendations focused on the high level of impunity and on violations of women's rights, including restrictions on reproductive rights (total ban on abortion). Meanwhile, the participation of El Salvador in the UN Human Rights Council and its votes cast in the UNGA Third Committee showed a strong commitment to the protection of human rights across the world. In November, the Legislative Assembly finally approved the accession of El Salvador to the Rome Statute of the ICC. The ILO supervisory mechanisms considered breaches of El Salvador with freedom of association, highlighting serious and urgent cases in this regard.

The adoption of the government's Five Year Development Plan provided the conditions for mainstreaming of human rights throughout all areas of public policy. The Plan will contribute to improving effective access to basic socio-economic rights, particularly through proposed actions on security, education and employment. An inclusive approach has been adopted to address these issues, mainly through national dialogues which have paved the way for stronger and better-coordinated strategies.

The National Council for Citizen Security and Coexistence adopted a comprehensive plan (Plan El Salvador Seguro, i.e. A Safe El Salvador) aiming to tackle the root causes of violence, reduce impunity, strengthen criminal justice, improve the protection of victims and promote the reinsertion of gang members. Authorities have recently started implementing urgent measures in the ten municipalities most affected by crime. In spite of this, the country experienced in 2015 a surge in homicides which led the government to step up its law enforcement efforts, allegedly at the expense of human rights. Impunity remained widespread in a context of violence that curtailed many social and economic rights.

In the area of women's rights, sustained commitment by the government allowed for some improvement, although the gender gap in access to basic rights remains significant. Meanwhile, the human rights situation of other vulnerable groups such as children, indigenous peoples and prisoners has registered only modest progress. Members of the LGBTI community have continued to suffer from exclusion and hatred, with 13 homophobic murders registered in 2015 and several cases of violence during Gay Pride events.

The EU's objectives on human rights and democracy in El Salvador are to improve social cohesion and universal access to economic and social rights; to help prevent social violence through the strengthening of institutional and social capabilities for peaceful conflict resolution; to strengthen local civil society organisations including work with human rights defenders; and to promote gender equality and fight violence against women. During 2015, work continued in all of those areas through bilateral cooperation programmes with public administrations, cooperation projects with civil society organisations and local authorities, political dialogue and the organisation of human rights-themed events.

Within the framework of its bilateral cooperation programmes, the EU continued to support the development of the country's universal social security protection system. The EU's cooperation with El Salvador in 2015 included support for the government's fiscal policy, for violence prevention policies, and for its flagship gender equality initiative ('Ciudad Mujer'). El Salvador also benefits from funding through the EIDHR, the Instrument contributing to Peace and Stability, and the civil society organisations and local authorities thematic line. Under the latter, a EUR 2 600 000 call for proposals was launched in late 2015. Its main priorities are promoting economic rights in rural areas focusing on small farmers, working with vulnerable youth and children, promoting entrepreneurship and economic empowerment of women and youth, and developing a culture of peace.

In its political dialogue with the Salvadoran authorities, the EU has brought to the table a number of human rights issues, such as the migrant children crisis, the total ban on abortion, the country's security situation and the need to advance social and economic rights. Work on accession to the Rome Statute (finally approved in November – see above) and on specific EU initiatives at the UN's Human Rights Council and the UNGA Third Committee also continued during 2015. The EU also delivered messages on issues of concern (violence against women, minorities' rights, human trafficking and migrant children). As part of its human rights promotion, the EU issued statements and organised public activities with Member States, the government, civil society and other stakeholders to commemorate human rights-related days such as the World Day against the Death Penalty, World Human Rights Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Throughout the year, the EU has continued its dialogue with civil society organisations, by holding consultation sessions prior to launching calls for proposals and regular meetings with human rights defenders, with the Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights and with other counterparts.

Grenada

Priority challenges include the abolition of the death penalty, equality and non-discrimination, domestic violence, failure to address human rights issues in the constitutional review, and discrimination against LGBTI individuals. Prison conditions continue to be very poor. Despite the EU's concerted efforts, the ongoing constitutional review process in Grenada has failed to address some essential human rights concerns, such as the death penalty, despite the de facto moratorium. However, measures for strengthening gender equality were introduced, even if more needs to be done. Domestic violence continues to be an issue of serious concern which the EU helps to address within the framework of the EIDHR. Grenada will benefit from two grants under a 2015 call for proposals. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) recognised Grenada's commitment to address gender equality and acknowledged the progress made in the implementation of parts of the draft National Strategic Plan on gender-based violence. Grenada has become proactive and committed in dealing with gender equality, by tightening up legislation to address sexual violence, improving protection orders for domestic violence and other relevant measures.

After several postponements, the government of Grenada will hold a referendum on the constitutional reform in 2016. The opposition National Democratic Congress has withdrawn from the Reform Committee, citing its dissatisfaction with the procedure and omission of key recommendations, including term limits for the prime minister, a fixed date for holding elections, a system of proportional representation mixed with the present 'first past the post' system, a single chamber of parliament instead of two, and provision in the constitution for an official opposition at all times.

Grenada has yet to abolish corporal punishment. A pilot project in several schools called the 'Child Friendly Schools Programme' promotes positive behaviour management strategies. Feedback from this project has been positive and the Ministry of Education intends to extend it to all schools. Prison conditions continue to be very difficult due to extreme overcrowding. The only prison in Grenada, designed for 198 inmates, held 450 prisoners in September 2015.

Guatemala

2015 was marked by the renewal of the mandate of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and the unveiling by the Prosecutor General in coordination with CICIG of high-level corruption schemes operating in the customs administration and the Social Security Institute. The revelations sparked a wave of peaceful social protests across the country and a major political crisis, culminating in the resignation and provisional imprisonment of the president, just four days before a general election.

In this challenging context, Guatemala managed to overcome the crisis while preserving the constitutional order: the Pérez Molina administration was changed, a transitional government assumed power and elections at five separate levels were successfully organised on time. The Supreme Court, Electoral Tribunal and Constitutional Court played key roles. The protests brought together traditionally polarised actors from across the ideological spectrum in a common call for structural reforms and transparency, creating new opportunities for building consensus over how best to resolve the long-term structural causes that underlie Guatemala's persistent human rights challenges. How much progress can be made in this regard will depend on the incoming government's ability to respond to high expectations with a concrete action plan.

Long-term human rights challenges in Guatemala include: high levels of social conflict (mainly over land disputes and extractive projects); labour law implementation, in particular freedom of association; violence against women and girls (VAWG); threats against human rights defenders and civil society representatives; freedom of expression; LGBTI rights; children's rights; indigenous peoples' rights, including the right to consultation; access to basic services; judicial independence and the rule of law, including prison conditions; and citizen security. On the judicial front, the trials of high-level officials alleged to have been involved in the corruption scandals constitute landmark steps towards the strengthening of the justice system. However, their completion over the coming months and years will also present a significant litmus test of the strength of judicial independence.

The fight against VAWG took a step forward when Congress changed the age of marriage to 18 for both boys and girls (previously 14) in November, in line with recommendations by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The challenge will now be its effective implementation. Concerning labour rights, and in particular freedom of association, progress – albeit limited - in the 2013 tripartite roadmap (government, trade unions and employers associations) and the evolving political context led to two postponements of an ILO decision on the establishment of a commission of inquiry concerning non-observance of ILO Convention 87, as well as a reinforced ILO presence.

The situation of human rights defenders continued to elicit concern by human rights organisations. According to the Guatemalan Human Rights Defenders' Protection Unit (UDEFEQUA), 2015 saw a slight decrease in the number of attacks against human rights defenders (455 attacks in the 11 months to November, compared to 813 in 2014). However, the attacks registered were more violent than in previous years and included 13 murders. In the field of transitional justice, no new cases were initiated in 2015 and the Ríos Montt trial continued to face numerous procedural delays. However, advancements included the payment of financial reparations in the emblematic Chixoy case and the conviction of ex-police chief Pedro Arredondo for the burning of the Spanish Embassy in 1980.

The EU's objectives on human rights and democracy in Guatemala are to: strengthen the justice system; promote the implementation and ratification of international conventions; reduce social conflicts; support the implementation of the existing legal framework on femicide and VAWG; and enhance the protection mechanisms for human rights defenders. During 2015 the EU strengthened political and policy dialogue with the Executive, Congress, judiciary, presidential candidates and civil society (including the private sector) in support of: the extension of CICIG; judicial reform; food security and environmental protection; conflict prevention and management; VAWG and raising the age of marriage for girls; implementation of ILO Conventions 87 and 169; protection for human rights defenders; and preserving the space for civil society. This dialogue was also reinforced via statements, opinion pieces and public speeches. Specific thematic events were also held on topics such as indigenous rights and freedom of expression.

During the political crisis, the EU used political dialogue to accompany a peaceful transition of power, the electoral process and the advancement of structural reform proposals. It also facilitated dialogue between traditionally polarised interlocutors (civil society, state, private sector, etc.) and carried out supplementary confidence-building activities which, since the election, have aimed to build trust and facilitate constructive exchanges. As in previous years, the EU continued its structural dialogue with human rights defenders via the Filter Group and thematic meetings with EU Member States. It also supported regular tripartite political meetings to monitor and accompany the complaint on non-observance of ILO Convention 87. The EU also utilised the second year of the GSP+ monitoring exercise to analyse the implementation of 27 international conventions. This action will feed into the EU's political dialogue efforts in 2016.

As regards cooperation, the EU financed five new projects in support of human rights defenders, including a project with the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights in Guatemala to monitor the situation of human rights defenders during the election; provided legal assistance and support to criminalised and at-risk human rights defenders and their families; and signed three new projects aimed at providing support to human rights defenders in rural areas and promoting indigenous rights. It also financed other relevant projects in support of: the justice sector (SEJUST) and CICIG; non-state actors; food security; environmental protection; combating VAWG; conflict prevention and resolution; implementation of ILO Conventions; and civil society's engagement with the Association Agreement.

Guyana

Priority challenges in Guyana include the death penalty; discrimination, including LGBTI rights; freedom of expression; civil society and human rights defenders; women's rights; children's rights and prison conditions. In May 2015, general elections took place in Guyana and resulted in a change of government for the first time since 1992. By the end of the year, the new government had not yet made any significant changes in human rights policy, and it appeared that problems such as death penalty legislation, criminalisation of male same-sex relations, and corporal punishment would likely remain unchanged.

In January 2015, Guyana's UPR took place. Regarding the rights of the LGBTI community, the government stated that the comments were noted. A Sexual Offences Bill, proposing amendments to existing gender discrimination legislation, was originally tabled in 2012 but remained before the National Assembly throughout 2015. Domestic violence continues to be a serious issue in Guyana. The EU has funded a number of projects in this area under the EIDHR, working with civil society organisations and the government. Under a call for proposals underway in late 2015, the issues of domestic violence, trafficking in persons, and rehabilitation of persons in detention were being considered.

The death penalty is still provided for in Guyana's national law, however there is a de facto moratorium and no execution has taken place since 1997. There are currently approximately 30 persons on death row. The death penalty is mandatory for a number of offences, but in 2010, the mandatory penalty was removed for murder except for the killing of members of the judiciary or the security forces. The government, however, stressed that this amendment to the law as well as the de facto moratorium are not due to a relaxation of the death penalty but rather, to procedural delays. The EU organised a successful regional conference on the abolition of the death penalty in November 2015. Although Guyana moved up five places on the 2015 World Press Freedom index compared to 2014, the overall score showed a decline and it remains a country with 'noticeable problems'.

Haiti

Human rights and democracy are top priorities for the EU in the context of its relations with Haiti. Specifically, this includes: consolidation of democracy and of democratic institutions; promoting the rule of law; fighting widespread violations of women's and children's rights, including gender-related violence and children living in conditions of domestic slavery ('Restaveks'); improving the dysfunctional judicial system and appalling detention conditions; and strengthening civil society organisations promoting human rights and human rights defenders. Other major concerns include non-prosecuted excessive use of force and ill-treatment by law enforcement bodies; prolonged pre-trial detention (75 % of the entire prison population is awaiting trial); human trafficking; and severe socio-economic inequalities. A study estimated that in 2015, 207 000 children under 15 are being exploited across the country. Gender violence is widespread and one additional element of concern is that many cases are not reported and many of those which are denounced are settled out of court, and that *juges de paix* (who do not have competence for criminal cases) are often the negotiators of such extrajudicial settlements.

Lack of institutional capacity and resources continue to represent serious obstacles to the implementation of existing and new human rights legislation. The EU has continued its dialogue with civil society and is supporting greater involvement of civil society organisations in EU activities as well as improving their advocacy capacities vis-à-vis the Haitian authorities.

The successive postponements of the electoral contests resulted in President Martelly ruling by decree from January 2015 when Parliament dissolved (with only 10 out of 30 Senators remaining in office). The country has been governed without a Parliament since then. The first round of legislative elections was held in August. The second round of the legislative elections and the first round of the presidential elections took place in October. However, that round was followed by a post-electoral crisis which postponed the second round of presidential elections, the completion of the legislative elections and local elections.

An Independent Electoral Commission was established to resolve the political stalemate by evaluating the October electoral round in order to address the claims of irregularities/frauds and make recommendations. The EU provided technical support to the process via its EU Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) for the entire electoral process, in an extremely complex institutional and political context and also contributed EUR 5 million to the UNDP-managed 'basket' fund for the organisation of the elections.

In support of institutional capacity building, the EU funded three projects, under the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, implemented by the Club de Madrid, IDEA and the UNDP, with the objective of providing high-level advice, facilitating interinstitutional dialogue, and strengthening the functioning of political parties and of the judiciary. As part of the EIDHR funds local call in 2014 and 2015, six new projects, for a total of EUR 900 000 were selected in November, in line with the EU's human rights and democracy priorities for the country. The projects will start up in early 2016. The EU portfolio of projects financed under this instrument will then include a dozen contracts worth approximately EUR 2.5 million. The themes of the new projects are child protection, women's rights, prison conditions, and the analysis of public policies and the fight against homophobia.

Honduras

The human rights situation in Honduras remains a matter of concern for the EU. Vulnerable groups such as the LGBTI community, women, journalists, justice operators and lawyers, as well as indigenous leaders, continue to be targets of violence and intimidation. Having said this, it is often difficult to distinguish whether individual cases were related to issues of human rights or were simply the product of an overall dangerous environment in which petty yet violent crime affects everyone.

While local authorities have in some cases proved able to provide direct support to victims, in general the effective protection of vulnerable groups has been insufficient. Despite existing difficulties, there have been improvements over recent years, and the current government is showing willingness to support progress on the ground, as with the forthcoming opening of a country office of the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), the approval of the Law for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, Social Communicators and Justice Operators and the acceptance of most, if not all, UPR recommendations. The challenge now is ensuring implementation.

The EU Delegation in Honduras is responsible for the largest donor programme on human rights in the country, including the EUR 5.5 million Honduras Human Rights Support Programme (PADH) and the EUR 31 million Promoting Fair and Accessible Justice in Honduras (EUROJUSTICIA) action, as well as a series of smaller, yet regular, global and local calls for proposals within the framework of the EIDHR. Results include the development of a national human rights policy, the strengthening of judicial reform and independence, and support for human rights defenders at risk.

In addition to the regular contact with government authorities, civil society and other relevant actors on human rights issues, the EU Delegation has in the last two years developed a platform for dialogue with civil society organisations and human rights defenders, 'Grupo ENLACE'. The Grupo ENLACE has become an active and effective forum for the debate and evaluation of emblematic human rights defender cases and human rights issues in general, involving not only the EU Delegation and EU Member States, but also Switzerland and the United Nations. In 2015, the group addressed five issues, including prisons and torture, disabled people, emblematic or local human rights defenders, the judicial system, and socio-economic and labour rights. Grupo ENLACE actions are diverse and have so far yielded important results, including responses from the government to requests for information, support for human rights defenders at risk and a number of resolved cases.

Jamaica

The EU's human rights priorities for Jamaica in 2015 focused on working towards the abolition of the death penalty; misconduct by the security forces; improving conditions of detention including for children; elimination of child abuse and promotion of children's rights; women's rights; and fighting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and improving the treatment of LGBTI persons. Access to justice remains a major problem. The EU and Member States addressed these issues through political dialogue, public diplomacy (e.g. on the UN's 16 days of activism 'End Violence against Women and Girls Now') and the EU's cooperation programmes.

Jamaica continues to retain the death penalty for murder, although it has observed a de facto moratorium on its application since 1988. The EU engaged in public diplomacy to underline that effective rehabilitation of prisoners and their reintegration into society will ultimately reduce public perception of the need for capital punishment.

Police misconduct continues to be an issue of major concern for human rights activists in Jamaica. The number of police-related killings remains worryingly high. The EU continued its support for the Independent Commission of Investigations (INDECOM), the oversight body for the security forces, tasked with investigating excesses and abuse by agents of the state, which has been instrumental in tackling this issue.

In 2015, Jamaica completed the UPR, accepting 92 of 168 recommendations, including inter alia on the establishment of a national human rights institution (for which advice is provided by the Commonwealth Secretariat), promoting rights of women, children and persons with disabilities, combating poverty, and increasing access to healthcare for all. Jamaica rejected other recommendations including on the ratification of several important human rights instruments e.g. on the abolition of the death penalty; the Optional Protocol to the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; and the Convention against Torture and its Optional Protocol. Furthermore, Jamaica did not support recommendations to decriminalise consensual same-sex conduct between adults and to take measures to reduce violence against LGBTI persons.

During 2015, the government of Jamaica adopted a National Child Diversion Policy, which will be supported through the 11th EDF. In addition, the EU awarded several grants to civil society organisations (CSOs) working on rehabilitation of prison inmates, and to improve the welfare of children in state institutions and prevent of child abuse. The EU also continued to work through CSOs providing grants, inter alia, to combat corruption in Jamaica by improving governance and the justice system and civil society oversight of rights legislation, to promote healthier lifestyles and patients' rights advocacy in the context of maternal, neo-natal and infant health, as well as improving civil society capacity for research-based advocacy, to undertake advocacy actions for LGBTI persons.

Mexico

As in previous years, Mexico displayed a proactive stance in human rights international fora, advancing topics of common EU-Mexico interest, including business and human rights, anti-terrorism, abolition of the death penalty, anti-bullying, the post-2015 Development Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals (by empowering national human rights institutions), and the Open Government Partnership.

There were a series of positive developments on the national legislative front in 2015, however Mexico continues to face major public security concerns and challenges in the fight against organised crime and corruption. The country has been marred by human rights-related problems, including police and military involvement in serious abuses, such as extrajudicial killings, torture and (enforced) disappearances. Impunity (with extremely low levels of prosecution for all forms of crime, between 98% and 99%), penetration of organised crime into the prison system but also into local and state government, and assassination of journalists (specifically in the State of Veracruz) remained serious challenges.

The ongoing investigations into high-profile cases such as Iguala, Tlatlaya and Apatzingán are still raising serious doubts, despite significant arrests made. The government's credibility has been severely damaged domestically and abroad, in particular after the release of the final report of the Group of Independent Experts (GIEI) on the Iguala case, which dismissed the official narrative over the fate of the 43 missing students and called the investigation into question. International bodies have underlined their concerns over the human rights situation during official visits to Mexico (UN Rapporteur on Torture, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights).

Against this backdrop, the EU redoubled its efforts and managed to maintain fruitful interaction both with Mexican authorities and with civil society organisations. The fifth high-level dialogue (HLD) on human rights between the EU and Mexico, chaired by the EUSR for Human Rights Lambrinidis and the Mexican Vice-Minister for Multilateral Affairs Juan Manuel Gómez-Robledo, took place in April in Mexico City. The EU and Mexico agreed that they would join efforts in the fight against torture (training independent bodies/ independent forensic medical services according to the Istanbul Protocol), in the fight against enforced disappearances (helping in the setting up of reliable databases) and in the strengthening of the National Protection Mechanism for Human Rights defenders and journalists. Moreover, it was agreed to cooperate in the protection of children's rights and on business and human rights.

The dialogue was preceded by the Third EU-Mexico civil society seminar (financed by the EU), which also took place in April. This seminar served as a space for interactive dialogue and for the exchange of experience and good practices related to human rights in Mexico and the EU, in fields such as the strengthening of the rule of law, rights of migrants, business and human rights, children and adolescents, among others. During the seminar, the 32 attending non-governmental organisations drew up a number of conclusions and recommendations which were presented at the beginning of the HLD. Both parties agreed to follow up at the technical level.

The EU Delegation to Mexico strengthened its engagement with non-governmental organisations through the permanent Working Group with Civil Society on Human Rights, which held several regular meetings and round table discussions during 2015. Under local guidelines on human rights defenders, the EU Delegation and Member States' missions continued their regular engagement with human rights defenders. Field visits were made to the States of Chihuahua, Mexico, Aguascalientes and the city of Juárez. Meetings were also held with high-level representatives of the federal authorities from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the Interior.

The EU Delegation to Mexico, together with EU Member States, issued two local declarations during the year: in May, condemning the murder of journalist Armando Saldaña Morales in the State of Veracruz, and in August, related to the murder of journalist Rubén Espinosa and four women in Mexico City. The EU continued to monitor closely developments in the case of Jyri Jaakkola, a Finnish citizen and supporter of local human rights defenders, killed in Oaxaca in 2010. The EU Delegation, in close coordination with the Embassy of Finland, helped to organise meetings for visiting Members of the European Parliament in January and in September, to follow up on the investigation into Jaakkola's death and to hold discussions with the competent authorities.

The EU's cooperation accompanied the political priorities under the bilateral DCI allocation, under the EIDHR and under the non-state actors (NSA) instrument. Beyond the concrete follow-up of the HLD, the EU and Mexico have agreed, within the framework of the Social Cohesion Laboratory II – co-financed by Mexico and the EU – on two areas for action in 2015-2017: the rights of children and adolescents (dialogue with CSOs, with the federal States' children's rights defenders, drawing up of the plan for technical assistance to identify the main capacity gaps for implementing the new Mexican legal framework in this domain); and business and human rights, inter alia contracting experts to prepare a document on guiding principles, and pursuing the objective of seeing Mexico adhering to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Three related critical areas are dealt with in this respect: social protection, consultation with indigenous communities on infrastructure investments and fiscal equity. Cooperation activities also include projects that have a human rights component with several institutions at State level (in particular in the State of Oaxaca and San Luis Potosí). In October, a call for proposals was launched under the EIDHR; the fight against torture and enforced disappearances and protection of journalists/HRDs have been chosen as the main priority axes, in line with the outcome of the HLD.

Nicaragua

The EU's objectives on human rights and democracy in the context of its relations with Nicaragua are to support efforts to strengthen the rule of law (transparency, efficiency, accountability); to strengthen the national framework for tackling gender-based violence; to encourage a free civil society active in promoting and protecting human rights and able to engage in policy discussions on the national development agenda; to promote the social, education and health rights of the most vulnerable groups through development cooperation; and to support initiatives for capacity building and increasing social awareness among young people and the protection of children's rights.

In 2015, work continued in these areas. A particular focus was placed on Nicaragua's security forces and the respect for human life, dignity and freedom of association and expression. The EU reiterated the importance of key issues, such as transparency, strengthening good governance and the rule of law, promoting the separation of powers and electoral issues, including the presence of opposition parties in the Supremo Electoral Council. At the same time, the EU welcomed the efforts of Nicaragua in the fight against human trafficking and hopes for improved coordination by Nicaragua with neighbouring countries concerning migration issues, notwithstanding the temporary crisis provoked by the influx of Cuban migrants in Costa Rica stopped at the Nicaraguan border on their way north.

Towards the end of the year, restrictions on the freedom of action were denounced by civil society organisations and there were reports of heavy-handed treatment of demonstrations by the police. Media groups and the opposition deplored harassment of journalists. The situation of indigenous peoples' rights, in relation to both infrastructure projects and respect for and protection of ancestral lands, was also affected. The EU continued closely to monitor respect for indigenous peoples' rights, in particular as regards the expansion of the agricultural frontier which may considerably affect their social and environmental rights. Special attention was also given to following up on the rights of inmates on trial or already convicted, as well as conditions in the national prison system and the custody cells of the National Police.

As regards financial cooperation, the EU continued to promote human rights through the EIDHR (10 projects) and non-state actors and local authorities (NSA-LA, 14 projects) thematic lines, as well as through projects directly financed by the EU Member States. Through these projects the EU addressed the following issues: citizens' participation, juvenile restorative justice, the rights of people with disabilities, human rights promotion focused on the Caribbean coastal region, women's and LGBTI rights, and children's rights. Dialogue with civil society was deep and continuous throughout the year, and a roadmap for the work of the EU with civil society in Nicaragua was prepared in 2015.

During the year, the EU concluded the joint activities with UNICEF celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child with a national journalism contest on the issue 'Innovation for childhood, innovation for justice'. Six journalists received awards. With EU support, Nicaragua was one of the first countries in the region to launch a reform of its Penal Code so as to incorporate criminal standards for fighting transnational crime and drug trafficking which were previously harmonised at Central America level. The newly amended Penal Code is awaiting approval in the parliament. Moreover, through its regional EUROsociAL programme, the EU offered technical assistance to Nicaragua to improve access to justice for vulnerable people, foster the development of alternative conflict resolution mechanisms in the judicial sphere (training for mediators) and support the authorities responsible for investigating gender-based violence (such as the Public Prosecutor, courts and forensics laboratory).

Panama

In May, Panama underwent its second UPR within the United Nations framework. Several positive aspects were noted since the country's previous UPR in 2010, including the ratification of several primary international Human Rights instruments (including the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance and the UN Conventions on Statelessness) and the extension of a standing invitation to thematic special procedures. In October, Panama was one of 18 States elected by the UN General Assembly as members of the Human Rights Council, where it will serve a three-year term as from January 2016.

President Varela claims that his main priority for Panama during his five-year mandate is to achieve real 'inclusive economic growth', promoting a strong social agenda. In the endeavour to achieve equality between men and women, the Minister for Social Development recently presented the Action Plan 2015-2019 to Achieve Equal Opportunities for Women. It is intended to be implemented by both the government and civil society. With the support of UNICEF, Panama continues to develop and implement the National Strategic Plan for Children and Teenagers. This process began in 2002 and will lead to final goals for 2020.

Prison and detention conditions present significant challenges in Panama. According to UNODC reports, 70 % of persons deprived of liberty in Panama have not been sentenced. This is mainly due to judicial delays and extensive use of pre-trial detention which in some cases is longer than the maximum sentence for the alleged crime; moreover there is an urgent need to reduce overcrowding (the country's adult prison population greatly exceeds the capacity of its prisons) and to improve prison conditions. Complaints about poor prison conditions focus on medical assistance, hygiene and abusive treatment by officials. The working conditions of prison officials also require improvement.

However, there have been efforts to improve the situation. The country is undergoing a transition from an inquisitorial to an accusatorial system of criminal justice, which has already reduced judicial delays. A new prison, 'Nueva Joya', (capacity of 5 000) was inaugurated in 2014; and Panama is carrying out a reform of the prison and detention rights system based on three pillars: respect for the rights and dignity of the detainees and prison staff; guarantee of their safety and that of the general population; and reintegration of those who have served their sentence. A working plan has been agreed, with short-, medium- and long-term goals. The EU is supporting these efforts. The EU-funded project 'Security cooperation in Panama (SECOPA)', worth EUR 28 million, is enhancing the capacity of the General Directorate of the Prison System (DGSP) to provide targeted programmes for the rehabilitation and reintegration of adult inmates. SECOPA will also improve the training system for prison staff, and support the establishment of a professional career. The project will finance the completion of an innovative centre for rehabilitation of minors in conflict with the law, and develop a modern penitentiary census in the country.

Approximately 10 % of Panamanians belong to indigenous communities, living in 28.6 % of the national territory. Although there are policies and legislation protecting these communities, there is still much work to be done to improve their living standards, access to public services and equal distribution, especially in the health sector, and land tenure. Several specific programmes are being implemented to strengthen protection of the rights of indigenous peoples; the Mesoamerica Health Programme 2015, the Water and Environment Programme, the Child Nutrition Programme, among others. The EU is financing the bilateral project 'Apoyo a la Cohesión Social' (COHESAL – 10 million EUR), implemented by the Ministry of Social Development, which contains several activities in favour of indigenous people and organisations. This project also aims indirectly at defending the economic and social rights of this community in the poorest areas of the country, through decentralisation and funding of local projects.

Panama recently adopted the National Plan to Combat Human Trafficking, which aims to design a national policy in this area. In 2015, the National Commission against Human Trafficking scheduled the following activities: training for security and counter (reception) staff of tourism and other private enterprises, introduction to the academic curriculum for counter and security personnel for COPA Airlines and training the personnel of the Panama Canal Authority. Panama is also working on a roadmap to make it the first country in Latin America to eliminate child labour by 2020.

Security is a priority of the Government Plan 2014-2019. Concerning the fight against drugs, attention has shifted towards prevention, as well as intensifying the fight against corruption, money laundering and financing of terrorism. Institutional strengthening and improvement of technology assets will also be addressed and there is interest in better addressing human trafficking as another consequence of transnational crime activities.

Paraguay

In its cooperation and dialogue with Paraguay on human rights and democracy, the EU focuses in particular on the improvement of the functioning of the justice and penitentiary systems, the institutionalisation of human rights, the protection of the rights of children, women, the LGBTI community and indigenous peoples, the fight against trafficking in human beings and respect for environmental rights.

The EU continued to pursue these issues in various formats, including through the monitoring of implementation of human rights conventions in the context of the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP+). The EU and Member States worked together to ensure coordination and systematic outreach. Paraguay is a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2015-2017, and the EU and EU Member States conducted demarches to seek common ground with Paraguay on international human rights issues. The EU deployed an Election Follow-Up Mission to Paraguay in April to assess the progress made in the implementation of the recommendations of the 2013 EU Election Observation Mission. In June, the European Parliament adopted a resolution expressing concern about the high number of child pregnancies in Paraguay.

As regards financial cooperation, the EIDHR provided support for women's rights, disabled persons, indigenous peoples in the Paraguayan Chaco, enhancing the role of civil society in monitoring the electoral system, the fight against human trafficking and the production and dissemination of an annual human rights report drafted by civil society organisations. Democracy, participation and institutional strengthening also constitute one of the priority sectors for the EU's bilateral development assistance to Paraguay in 2014-2020.

Peru

The EU's priorities on human rights and democracy in the context of its relations with Peru are the follow-up of the National Human Rights Plan, the rights of indigenous peoples and the implementation of the Prior Consultation Law, access to justice, the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, economic and social rights, freedom of assembly, human rights defenders, women's rights, human trafficking and child labour.

The dialogue on human rights with Peru continued in 2015 on a very regular basis, with the second formal technical dialogue on human rights in July, complemented by the discussions at the annual high-level dialogue. Issues discussed included business and human rights and the formulation of a national corporate social responsibility policy, gender violence, the fight against discrimination and democracy, rule of law and good governance, with an update on the preparation of the 2016 general and presidential elections. Work will be taken forward in 2016 with a view to institutionalising the dialogue through the establishment of formal terms of reference.

An important step in the reconciliation process related to the violence in the *Sendero Luminoso* period between 1980 and 2000 was taken with the inauguration in December 2015 of the Museum of the *Lugar de la Memoria, la Tolerancia y la Inclusión Social* by President Humala. The project was supported politically and financially by the EU and Germany. This is one important measure advocated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. At local level, the EU Delegation kept close contacts with civil society organisations, the Office of the Ombudsman and government bodies on the human rights situation, human rights defenders and indigenous peoples. It maintained constant communication to follow up on individual cases. Peru remained a reliable partner in international fora, voting close to EU positions.

EU funding for new human rights projects in Peru in 2015 under the EIDHR amounted to EUR 2.18 million, with in particular a project to foster the political culture ahead of the 2016 elections and a project to help indigenous people to fight discrimination over their territories.

Saint Kitts and Nevis

Priority challenges include death penalty abolition, women's rights, human rights capacity building among law enforcement officials, prisons, children's rights, LGBTI rights, security and implementation of the recommendations from the UPR review in November 2015.

The EU advocates for a moratorium on the death penalty with a view to its abolition. Overcrowding in the Saint Kitts prison remains a serious concern. The country has yet to abolish corporal punishment. Several outreaches were undertaken in the context of the UNGA Third Committee on Human Rights resolutions. Saint Kitts and Nevis will benefit from a regional grant financed under a 2015 call for proposals to tackle domestic violence; implementation will start in 2016. The country suffers high levels of crime, with the linked challenges of ensuring protection of rights in connection with national and citizen's security and addressing violence in society.

In February 2015, Team Unity, a coalition of three opposition parties, won the general election, replacing the Labour Party which had been in power since 1995. While election day was orderly and peaceful, technical and procedural issues caused delays in the counting and transmission of the results. In November, the new government tabled legislation to limit the Prime Minister's time in office to two five-year terms.

In November, Saint Kitts and Nevis underwent its second UPR, not accepting over half of its recommendations, including those related to signing and acceding to all core Human Rights treaties, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, a moratorium on the death penalty and prohibition of corporal punishment. Recurrent recommendations were also related to protecting women and children from domestic violence, speedily enacting the Domestic Violence Act passed in Parliament in 2014, and taking additional measures to address gender-based discrimination.

The country was commended on its efforts to promote human rights with regard to social services, education and youth employment. It is making efforts to improve the security aspects of its controversial Citizenship by Investment Programme, the largest in the region. The government extended an invitation to the regional UN Office for consultation soon after the UPR, to consider options for establishing a National Human Rights Institution.

Saint Lucia

Priority challenges include the abolition of the death penalty, police brutality, gender-based discrimination and domestic and sexual violence, child abuse and LGBTI rights. The effectiveness of criminal justice remains a matter of concern, as does access to healthcare. Implementation of the 2015 UPR recommendations is another priority.

In its political dialogue with Saint Lucia, the EU has constantly striven for the abolition of the death penalty, ensuring a greater level of accountability on the part of the police, improving the criminal justice system and the enacting of legislation to protect individuals from discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Several outreaches were undertaken in the context of the UNGA Third Committee on Human Rights resolutions. Saint Lucia will benefit from support under the EIDHR to tackle domestic violence. A regional project selected under a 2015 call for proposals will start operating in 2016.

In November, Saint Lucia underwent its second UPR, which highlighted issues of gender-based discrimination, domestic and sexual violence and criminalisation of consensual same-sex conduct. The country received recommendations on protection of children's rights, abolition of the death penalty and ratification of certain international agreements. It was commended for ratification of the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and for significant efforts in securing access to water, food and health for its people. Saint Lucia undertook to examine 121 recommendations.

The country is currently in the process of reforming its juvenile justice system. Child abuse remains a serious societal concern and the government has also launched awareness campaigns which target society in general as well as professionals within the field. Saint Lucia has yet to abolish corporal punishment. In September, the government introduced a Use of Force Policy to ensure that proper practices are adhered to by the police. In March, the Prime Minister presented an independent report produced by the CARICOM Implementing Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS) which looked into alleged extrajudicial killings by the police between 2010 and 2011. Concerned about lack of follow-up, the EU issued a local statement calling on authorities to act upon the report and ensure due process.

In June, the United Nations Child Rights Committee considered the combined second to fourth periodic reports on Saint Lucia. It welcomed the adoption of several legislative measures, including in 2014 the Anti-Gang Act. It also noted the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict in 2014, continuing a positive trend of accession to or ratification of important human rights Protocols and Conventions. Nonetheless the Committee urged Saint Lucia to address issues relating to corporal punishment, parental guidance and responsibilities, children deprived of a family environment, abuse and neglect, adolescent health, economic exploitation of children including child labour, sexual exploitation and abuse and juvenile justice. The Committee was concerned that corporal punishment is still seen as a lawful way of disciplining children and about the high level of incest with and sexual abuse of boys and girls.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

Human rights priorities include domestic violence, sexual violence against women and girls, children's rights, LGBTI discrimination, the death penalty and human rights capacity building among law enforcement officials. Several outreaches were undertaken in the context of the UNGA Third Committee on Human Rights resolutions.

Capital punishment remains in legislation, although under a de facto moratorium. Civil society groups reported that rape and violence against women remain a serious and pervasive problem. In May, the parliament took an important step by passing domestic violence legislation that strengthens the protection of victims of abuse and creates a reporting obligation for a larger segment of society. The Domestic Violence Act 2015 also broadens the definition of domestic violence to include 'any controlling or abusive behaviour that harms the health, safety or well-being of the applicant or any child in the care of the applicant'.

General elections were held in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in December, resulting in a fourth consecutive term for Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves and his Unity Labour Party. The opposition New Democratic Party protested the very close outcome, alleging serious fraud, and announced its intention to mount a legal challenge to the voting in at least one constituency. The elections were observed by the OAS, the Commonwealth and the CARICOM Secretariat and their missions endorsed the results.

Suriname

The EU's priorities on human rights and democracy in the context of its relations with Suriname include: legal issues; conditions in prisons and detention centres; domestic violence/sexual violence; LGBTI rights; and trafficking in persons, including women and children for sexual exploitation. There are also concerns about: widespread government corruption; cases of press intimidation; discrimination against women; Maroons (descendants of escaped slaves), Amerindians and other minorities; and child labour in the informal sector.

Suriname's National Assembly adopted a new Penal Code which included abolition of the death penalty (although not in the military code). This was welcomed in a Statement by the EU HR/VP as 'an important step forward that sends a welcome signal to other countries in the region and beyond', also noting that 'this could be further consolidated by signing and ratifying the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights, both instruments aiming at the global abolition of the death penalty'. Shortly before the abolition of the death penalty, in February 2015, the EU had organised a seminar in Paramaribo on the abolition of the death penalty. The project received EU funding.

Human rights issues are discussed within the framework of the annual political dialogue under Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement and in bilateral meetings. The third round of political dialogue took place in Paramaribo in March 2015 and included discussions on human rights and governance, the amendment of the Amnesty Law, trafficking of human beings, the death penalty (still exists in the military code), corruption and prison conditions. An EIDHR-funded programme on Building Suriname Civil Society Accountability for Human Rights and Good Governance is being implemented by a local non-governmental organisation. The project is funded with EUR 125 000 from 2014 to 2016.

Following general elections in May 2015, the incumbent president Desi Bouterse's National Democratic Party (NDP) won 26 parliamentary seats in the 51-seat National Assembly, giving him a one-seat majority. The opposition coalition V7 won 17 seats, ABOP won five seats, and the remainder were distributed among the divided opposition. This is the first time the NDP has had an overall majority in the National Assembly.

Trinidad and Tobago

Priorities include the abolition of the death penalty; promoting and safeguarding women's and children's rights; tackling discrimination against LGBTI persons; and improving prison conditions and respect for prisoners' rights; supplemented by activities contributing to the strengthening of democracy.

The EU Delegation continued to engage in human rights discussions in various fora. The second round of the political dialogue in the context of Article 8 of the Cotonou Agreement took place in Port of Spain in January 2015, with discussions on human rights issues including progress in addressing the first round of UPR recommendations; the need for continuation of the current moratorium on execution and eventually abolition of the death penalty; the delay in approval of the gender policy; steps taken to ratify the optional protocol on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The EU applauded the establishment of the Children's Authority and noted with positive interest the country's acceptance of the important UPR recommendation to work towards reducing the case backlog, address inefficiencies in the judicial system and improve prison conditions. Concerns were expressed about the lack of safe spaces for girl prison detainees and the need for the government to prioritise activities geared towards improving prison conditions. The EU also expressed deep concern regarding the high number of alleged extrajudicial killings.

Following elections in September 2015 and the subsequent change of government, officials stated their intention to implement the death penalty as per legislation, suggesting a possibility that hangings may resume, though a de facto moratorium has been in place since 1999. On the occasion of Human Rights Day, the Delegation in collaboration with partners organised a panel on Diagnosing Human Rights in Trinidad and Tobago. It continued supporting the fight against the death penalty as well as against LGBTI discrimination, including through dissemination of the HR/VP's statements on the World Day against the Death Penalty and on the International Day against Homophobia. Following the abolition of the Ministry of Gender and Children, the new government assigned this portfolio to the Minister of State in the Office of the Prime Minister. On Universal Children's Day, the EU in collaboration with the UNDP made a public outreach towards girls who are wards of the State, providing a counselling session for the young people concerned. The EU continued its dialogue with civil society organisations including monthly meetings with LGBTI groups. Trinidad and Tobago benefited, for the first time, from the EIDHR call for proposals, resulting in the award of grants in support of activities which aim to have the death penalty abolished and to promote gender equality. Civil society continues to engage government on the need for constitutional reform. This sector will be further supported, to include the development of the governance issues under the 11th EDF and CSO/LA thematic budget lines.

United States of America (USA)

In 2015, President Obama's administration continued to place a strong emphasis on promoting human rights and democracy in the USA's bilateral relations with third countries and in multilateral fora, notably in the UN and the OSCE. President Obama's UNGA 70 speech enabled him to assert, in particular through the lens of the wars in Syria and Eastern Ukraine, that the USA will never cease to stand up for human rights.

With regard to the human rights situation in the USA, some positive developments took place in 2015 in the area of the death penalty and criminal justice reform. In addition, steps were taken to reduce the number of detainees in the Guantánamo detention centre. However, no proper follow-up to the December 2014 findings of the report by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence:

Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program was carried out.

In regard to the death penalty, 2015 marked a good trend in the USA, with the lowest numbers of executions and new death sentences for more than 20 years. The states of Nebraska and Connecticut abolished the death penalty, bringing the number of states that still allow the death penalty down to 31. Pennsylvania announced a moratorium. Overall, public support for the death penalty among Americans has decreased. Even though the Obama administration has not actively worked to persuade Congress to abolish the death penalty at federal level, the president admitted that he is 'deeply concerned' about its implementation. The EU export ban on drugs for execution has had a considerable impact on the death penalty environment and the public debate about executions in the last four years.

The EU has repeatedly called for the closure of the Guantánamo Bay detention facility. The efforts of the administration to close the detention centre and transfer the remaining detainees remained largely blocked by Congress. Nevertheless, some progress was made in 2015 in connection to the transfer of detainees to third countries. Of the roughly 780 people who have been detained at Guantánamo Bay, 107 remained as of end November 2015. An agreement to transfer a further 17 detainees was reached in December. However, the majority of Congress remains strongly opposed to any transfer of Guantánamo detainees to the USA. The National Defense Authorization Act, adopted by Congress in November, contains legal obstacles to closing the prison, including a ban on using funds to transfer the prisoners to the USA or to build facilities to house them in the future. No proper follow-up to the Senate report on the CIA detention and interrogation programme, which revealed serious human rights violations at the Guantánamo detention facility, was carried out in 2015.

2015 marked a turning point in criminal justice reform. The USA has an extremely high per capita rate of incarceration and holds more prisoners in solitary confinement than any other democratic nation. President Obama has called on Congress to pass a meaningful criminal justice reform with the aim of making the US criminal justice system fairer and more effective and addressing the vicious cycle of poverty, crime, and incarceration. The Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015 was supported by a strong bipartisan vote in the Senate Judiciary Committee. In addition, some progress has been made on solitary confinement. In September, as part of a landmark legal settlement, California agreed to an overhaul of the use of solitary confinement in its prisons, including strict limits on the prolonged isolation of inmates.

The EU Delegation in Washington DC continued to engage actively with the relevant parts of the administration, Congress and non-governmental organisations on all the above topics. The EU also continued its engagement with the USA on other major human rights issues, including women's rights, disability rights, LGBTI rights, freedom of expression and the ratification of international instruments. The EU Delegation made a demarche to the US administration in favour of swift ratification of the Arms Trade Treaty, which inter alia contains clauses related to prevention of human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law.

Throughout 2015, the EU and USA continued close cooperation in the area of the human rights, notably in multilateral fora such as the UN and the OSCE and in relation to third country situations. Annual Human Rights consultations took place in February. The cooperation between the EU, its Member States and the US also continued within the framework of the Global Equality Fund, Equal Future Partnership, and the Freedom Online Coalition.

During his visit to Washington DC in September, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Lambrinidis, spoke at Freedom House about key challenges around the world and EU human rights policy. Human Rights Day provided the opportunity for the EU Delegation to launch a social media campaign focusing on several positive results in the field of human rights which have been achieved recently by the EU.

Uruguay

The EU's objectives on human rights and democracy in the context of its relations with Uruguay include supporting the reform and modernisation of the criminal justice and prison system, strengthening the rights of women and children, reinforcing anti-discrimination policies and citizen security. Overall, in 2015 Uruguay celebrated '30 years of uninterrupted democracy', with 2014 national elections and 2015 municipal elections being held through a transparent and peaceful electoral process.

In 2015 the National Human Rights Institution (INDDHH) reported overcrowding, inhumane and degrading conditions and excessive use of force and psychotropic drugs at homes run by SIRPA (the Adolescent Offenders' Division). It also pointed out cases of sexual exploitation of minors in the Uruguayan Institute for Children and Adolescents (INAU) hostels. Despite the numerous steps taken to address domestic violence, the number of reported cases increased in 2015. In November, the government presented a 2016-2019 national action plan for a life free of gender violence, the main goals being to reduce the number of deaths based on gender and the number of women suffering violence. The Plan on Racial Equality 2015-2020 for Afro-descendants, issued in July, uncovers the discrimination which exists in Uruguay. The second contingent of Syrian refugees, which was to arrive at the end of 2015, was put on hold. In 2014, Uruguay underwent its second UPR. The government is working on a voluntary report to present how the recommendations made have been taken on board.

The EU supports human rights in Uruguay through the EIDHR, as well as through the thematic programmes supporting civil society. In 2015 the EU financed projects in the areas of citizen security, rights of women and children, violence against women, sexual abuse and social cohesion. Furthermore, the EU continued to provide financial support through the bilateral programme supporting the reform of the Uruguayan criminal justice and penitentiary systems.

Venezuela

The EU does not have a formal political dialogue with the Venezuelan government, but ad hoc discussions on human rights take place inter alia between the EU Delegation, Member State embassies and the Venezuelan authorities. This also occurs at more senior levels of the EEAS during visits by the Venezuelan authorities to Brussels.

Concerns remained about trials of opposition leaders, independent lawyers and business leaders. The EU continued the observation of trials in the cases of Leopoldo López and of Judge Afuni. The EU Delegation, in a concerted effort with Member States present in country, attempted to attend and observe the trials, but was in most cases not allowed to enter the courtrooms. The Spokesperson of the HR/VP published statements on the arrest of Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma (February) and on the trial of Leopoldo López (September).

The EU repeatedly signalled its readiness to send an election observation mission for the December legislative elections (statement by the HR/VP's spokesperson of 25 June), but was not invited by the country's electoral authority. The election campaign was perceived as inclined in favour of the incumbent government. The government's control of the media and public space left little room for the opposition to present alternative views. In spite of this, the opposition succeeded in winning a potential 2/3 'super majority' in the National Assembly (subject to legal challenges which were ongoing at the time of writing).

EU cooperation activities focused on women's and children's rights, on the rights of indigenous peoples, on good governance (technical assistance to the National Assembly, institutional capacity building in municipalities), on the situation of human rights defenders, freedom of information and refugees. Public diplomacy events concentrated on the promotion of gender equality.

The ILO standard supervisory mechanisms considered breaches of Venezuela with freedom of association, highlighting serious and urgent cases in this regard.
