

SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES 2014 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is a multi-party, parliamentary democracy. Government control lies with the prime minister and his cabinet. Vincentians returned Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves to office for a third term in December 2010 elections. International observers assessed the vote as generally free and fair. Authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

The most serious human rights problems were occasional police use of excessive force and gender-based violence.

Other human rights problems included official corruption, lack of government transparency, discrimination, child abuse, and laws that discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons.

The government took steps to punish officials who committed abuses, and there was not a widespread perception of impunity for security force members.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. On occasion police officers shot and killed persons encountered in the line of duty.

On January 16, an off-duty police officer shot and killed a man who had attacked a woman with a large knife. A coroner's jury found no evidence of any criminal wrongdoing by the officer.

Authorities opened a coroner's inquest to address the May 2013 death of the man who was shot and killed by police after attempting to escape from police custody while facing robbery charges in court. Authorities had recently released the man from prison after serving 17 years for rape, and he had subsequently been charged with threatening the life of the prime minister. The coroner's jury did not find anyone criminally responsible for the death.

Authorities held a coroner's inquest to address the 2012 incident in which police shot and killed three Venezuelan men after the Vincentian Coast Guard intercepted their vessel. The coroner adjourned the inquest and issued summonses for witnesses from Venezuela. As of September authorities received no response to either the service of the summonses or the availability of the witnesses.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and law prohibit such practices; however, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) St. Vincent and the Grenadines Human Rights Association (SVGHRA) asserted the police used excessive force, although local SVGHRA assessed that police conduct had improved in the last year.

Citizens alleging police abuse can lodge complaints with the Complaint Department within the police force or an independent government oversight committee. If a particular complaint has merit, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) files charges. The government did not normally provide any public information about the disposition of such complaints, any disciplinary charges, or other actions taken.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions improved with the 2012 opening of the Belle Isle Correctional Facility but remained poor for prisoners held in Her Majesty's Prison in Kingstown.

Physical Conditions: Belle Isle is designed to hold 288 inmates, with nine inmates per cell, in separate quarters for males and females. As of August the prison held 242 male inmates and no female inmates. Her Majesty's Prison held an additional 189 prisoners in a building designed to hold 150. Authorities reported five prisoners to be HIV positive, only three of whom were receiving antiretroviral treatment. Prisoners had access to food and potable water.

The SVGHRA reported prison problems such as endemic violence, understaffing, underpaid guards, uncontrolled weapons and drugs, increasing incidence of

HIV/AIDS, and unhygienic conditions. Living conditions in the newer Belle Isle facility represented a significant improvement over Her Majesty's Prison. The SVGHRA also alleged that guards routinely beat prisoners to extract information regarding escapes, violence, and crime committed in the prison. Key problems included the inability to segregate prisoners, gangs, and contraband, including cell phones and drugs.

As of October the female-only Fort Charlotte Prison, where conditions were antiquated and unhygienic, held 11 inmates in a facility designed to hold 25 inmates.

With the opening of the Belle Island facility, authorities held most pretrial detainees separately from convicted prisoners. Authorities held young offenders (16 to 21 years of age), 10 percent of the total male prison population, with adult convicted prisoners.

Conditions were inadequate for juvenile offenders. Boys younger than 16 were held at the Liberty Lodge Boys' Training Center, which takes in at-risk boys who can no longer stay at home due to domestic problems or involvement with criminal activity. Most of the boys were at the center because of domestic problems, and only a small number were charged with committing a crime. The police also reported they kept some young male offenders at the police station, where they lived and performed basic chores instead of being incarcerated.

Administration: Recordkeeping on prisoners was adequate. Courts often released nonviolent offenders on bond instead of sentencing them to prison terms. The conditions of the bond required good behavior on the part of the offender to avoid serving time in prison. Prisoners were free to practice any religion of their choosing, and authorities generally respected this right. Each convict could have one visitor per week. There were no limitations on visitors for pretrial detainees. Local churches organized weekly religious services. While there is no official prison ombudsman, a prison board composed of a magistrate and a justice of the peace visited all three prisons bimonthly. During their visits prisoners with complaints can speak directly to the board. In addition prisoners could file complaints by writing the court registrar who schedules court hearings.

Independent Monitoring: In addition to the prison board, the government permitted prison visits by independent human rights observers, and such visits took place during the year.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, and the government generally observed these prohibitions.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The Royal Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Police, the only security force in the country, is responsible for maintaining national security. Its forces include the Coast Guard, Special Services Unit, Rapid Response Unit, Drug Squad, and an Anti-Trafficking unit. The police force reports to the minister of national security, a portfolio held by the prime minister. The Criminal Investigations Department investigated all police killings and referred them to coroner's inquests.

Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the police, and the government has effective mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse and corruption. The government operated an oversight committee to monitor police activity and hear public complaints against police misconduct. There were no verified reports of impunity during the year, and the police chief suspended or dismissed officers from the police force for inappropriate conduct.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law requires judicial authority to issue arrest warrants. Police apprehended persons openly, and detainees may seek judicial determinations of their status after 48 hours if not already provided. The bail system functioned and was generally effective. Authorities generally allowed detainees prompt access to a lawyer. For indigent detainees accused of a capital offense, the state provides a lawyer. For other crimes the state does not provide a lawyer and defendants represent themselves in court.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provides for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for fair, public trials, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right. The High Court used juries for criminal matters, but the civil

court or magistrate's courts did not use them. The court usually appoints attorneys only for indigent defendants charged with a capital offense. Defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty, may confront and question witnesses, may appeal verdicts and penalties, and have access to relevant government-held evidence once a case reaches the trial stage. Defendants may also present their own witnesses and evidence. Lengthy delays occurred in preliminary inquiries for serious crimes. Witnesses sometimes refused to testify because they feared retaliation, which negatively affected prosecution of crimes.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

There is an independent, impartial judiciary in civil matters, where one can bring lawsuits seeking damages for a human rights violation.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibits such actions, and the government generally respected these prohibitions in practice.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution and law provide for freedom of speech and press, and the government generally respected these rights. An independent press, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to ensure freedom of speech and press.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: While the independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views without restriction, there continued to be accounts of the prime minister or other officials rebuking the press for comments critical of the government and monitoring the activities of some journalists, spurring some reports of self-censorship.

Libel Laws/National Security: In July 2013 authorities arrested opposition Senator Vynette Frederick and charged her with perjury, shortly after a magistrate

dismissed less serious perjury charges stemming from a defamation suit she had filed against Prime Minister Gonsalves. The new, more serious perjury charges related to the same incident. Authorities expected trial preparations to take approximately two years, and no developments occurred during the year. Such lawsuits were not uncommon and may be used to protect one's political reputation.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. According to the International Telecommunication Union, 45 percent of households had internet access in 2011 and 52 percent of citizens used the internet in 2013.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The law provides for the freedoms of assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

The government was prepared to cooperate with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees and other persons of concern.

Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The country's laws do not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has not established a system for providing protection to refugees. There were no refugees or asylum seekers residing within the country.

Section 3. Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The law provides citizens the ability to change their government through free and fair elections, which they exercised through elections based on universal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In 2010 elections voters returned the ruling United Labor Party to office, giving it eight of the 15 elected seats in the unicameral House of Assembly (which also includes six appointed senators). The opposition New Democratic Party increased its seats from four to seven. International observers from the Caribbean Community and the Organization of American States declared the elections generally free and fair.

Participation of Women and Minorities: Women were able to participate in political life on the same legal basis as men. Women held two of the 21 seats in the House of Assembly, including one member of parliament and one senator. One woman, the deputy prime minister, held a cabinet-level position, and another woman served as cabinet secretary.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, but the government did not implement the law effectively. The government did not use anticorruption laws to prosecute high-level government officials.

Corruption: Allegations of political handouts and other forms of low-level corruption in the time leading up to the 2010 election continued to plague both parties. Such bribes were historically a part of the country's political culture. No government agency was specifically responsible for combating government corruption. The DPP has the authority to prosecute such claims but did not use it.

Financial Disclosure: There were no financial disclosure laws for public officials.

Public Access to Information: The law provides for public access to information. Human rights organizations considered the mechanism for gaining access deficient and assisted individuals in obtaining information. There was a narrow list of exceptions outlining the grounds for nondisclosure, but no specific timeline for the relevant authority to disclose or respond. There are no criminal or administrative sanctions for not providing a response, and there is no appeal mechanism for review of a disclosure denial. There were reasonable fees for photocopying documents. There were public outreach activities via radio call-in shows encouraging use of the program.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

There were no restrictions on international human rights groups. A domestic human rights group, the SVGHRA, generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing its findings on human rights cases. Government officials were somewhat receptive to its views.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law provides for equal treatment regardless of race or gender, and the government generally enforced this provision. The constitution does not address equal treatment regarding disability, language, sexual orientation, or social status.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal, and the government generally enforced the law when victims came forward. Depending on the magnitude of the offense and the age of the victim, sentences for rape begin at 10 years' imprisonment. Judges rarely imposed the maximum penalty of life imprisonment. Authorities referred allegations of rape or any abuse against women to the police. Police were generally responsive to these complaints, but fear of reprisal may deter some survivors from seeking assistance. Police and human rights groups reported that perpetrators commonly made payoffs to survivors of rape or sexual assault in exchange for survivors not pressing charges. Although no special unit is devoted to these types of crimes, authorities had specially trained some officers to handle them.

Civil society groups reported that rape and violence against women remained a serious and pervasive problem. The law does not criminalize domestic violence

specifically, but it provides protection for survivors. Authorities could bring charges in cases involving domestic violence under assault, battery, or other similar laws, but police were often reluctant to follow up on domestic violence cases. As a result perpetrators of crimes against women often enjoyed impunity. The government's Division of Gender Affairs offered 19 different programs to assist women and children. The government opened a crisis center in 2012 for survivors of domestic violence; however, the shelter was inadequate to meet the needs of local women because it lacked staff, security, and reliable resources.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): No law prohibits FGM/C, and the practice was virtually nonexistent in the country.

Sexual Harassment: The law does not specifically prohibit sexual harassment, although authorities could prosecute it under existing laws, which local human rights groups and women's organizations considered ineffective.

Reproductive Rights: The government recognized the basic right of couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing, and timing of their children; to obtain the information and means to do so; and to attain the highest standard of reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion, and violence. Access to information on modern contraception and skilled health care during pregnancy, at delivery, and during postpartum were widely available. Women had access to emergency health care, including services for the management of complications arising from abortions.

Discrimination: Women enjoyed the same legal rights as men, although in practice many women were marginalized due to financial dependence. Women received an equitable share of property following separation or divorce. The law requires equal pay for equal work, and authorities generally enforced it.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship is derived by birth within the country's territory or from either of one's parents. There was universal birth registration.

Child Abuse: The law provides a limited legal framework for the protection of children and the Family Services Division of the Social Development Ministry monitored and protected the welfare of children. The division referred all reports of child abuse to the police for action and provided assistance in cases where children applied for protection orders with the family court. Reports of unlawful

sexual intercourse with children under 15 remained a problem and were linked to transactional sex with minors. Such cases often were difficult to prosecute, since witnesses were reluctant to testify and discussion of these types of abuse could be considered taboo. Despite these challenges the DPP successfully prosecuted a number of cases. Government and NGO interlocutors indicated that child abuse--including neglect and physical, sexual, and emotional abuse--and incest were significant problems, although statistics were not available.

Early and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age for marriage is 18, and parental consent was required for underage marriage. Most sexual relationships involving a child and an adult tended to take place outside the bounds of legal marriage. Statistics were not available, but less than an estimated 1 percent of marriages involved persons under age 18.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): No law prohibits FGM/C, and the practice was virtually nonexistent in the country.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: Some male and female teenagers engaged in prostitution and transactional sex. The minimum age of consensual sex is 16. The penalty for child prostitution is 14 years' imprisonment. The law prohibits statutory rape with special provisions for those less than 13 years of age. The penalty for statutory rape of a girl over 13 but less than 16 is five years imprisonment; for girls under age 13, it is life imprisonment. NGO and government sources reported that mothers of girls might pressure their children to have sexual relations with older men as a way to supplement family income. The law does not specifically prohibit child pornography.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction.

Anti-Semitism

There was no organized Jewish community, and there were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical and mental disabilities in employment, access to health care, and the provision of other state services and the government generally observed these prohibitions. The law does not mandate access to buildings for persons with disabilities and access for such persons generally was difficult. The law prohibiting discrimination against persons with disabilities does not mention travel and transportation specifically; however, persons with disabilities traveled freely. Communications were available for persons with disabilities, but the government did not have programs to facilitate communication through technology. There were no restrictions on voting or other civic participation. Education was provided until age 21 for persons with disabilities, and the government partially supported a school for persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities also could attend public schools. A separate rehabilitation center treated an average of five persons daily. The Ministry of National Mobilization, Social Development, NGO Relations, Family, Gender Affairs, and Persons with Disabilities is responsible for assisting persons with disabilities.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Consensual same-sex conduct is illegal under indecency statutes and some sexual activity between men is also illegal under anal intercourse laws. Indecency statutes carry a maximum penalty of five years, and anal intercourse acts carry a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison, although these laws were rarely enforced. No laws prohibit discrimination against a person on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Anecdotal evidence suggested there was social discrimination against LGBT persons in the deeply conservative society, although local observers believed such attitudes of intolerance were slowly improving. Members of professional and business classes were more inclined to conceal their sexual orientation.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

HIV infection rates were low, and the disease was prevalent in less than 1 percent of the population, according to the National AIDS Program. Although no statistics were available, anecdotal evidence suggested there was some societal discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS. There is a government HIV

secretariat, but local NGOs found it to be inadequate. Approximately a dozen NGOs were working on AIDS-related issues, but funding difficulties led to cutbacks in these services.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the rights of workers to form and join unions of their choice, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination and dismissal for engaging in union activities. Although it does not require reinstatement of workers fired for union activity, a court can and often does order reinstatement.

The law does not require employers to recognize a particular union as an exclusive bargaining agent. The law provides that if both parties consent to arbitration, the minister of labor can appoint an arbitration committee from the private sector to hear the matter. The law provides for establishment of an arbitration tribunal and a board of inquiry in connection with trade disputes and allows provision for the settlement of such disputes. Authorities formed arbitration panels, which included tripartite representation from government, businesses, and unions, on an ad hoc basis when labor disputes occurred.

Workers providing services deemed essential (defined as electricity, water, hospital, and police) are prohibited from striking unless they provide at least a 14-day notice to the authorities. Some of the sectors defined as strategic exceed the International Labor Organization standard for essential services.

The government generally enforced labor laws effectively. Government penalties of up to \$5,000 Eastern Caribbean Dollars (XCD) (\$1,852) generally were sufficient to deter violations.

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining were respected in practice.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor; however, the government reported no forced labor investigations, prosecutions, or convictions during the year. Employing five inspectors, the government recognized there were

not enough inspectors to carry out the full extent of their assigned duties, and this led to difficulties in inspecting workplaces. Penalties against forced labor carry punishments of up to 20 years' imprisonment with fines. These penalties are commensurate with serious crimes and were sufficient to deter violations. Men, women, and children were vulnerable to forced labor, primarily in agriculture.

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law sets the minimum working age at 14. Compulsory education ends at age 16. The law does not place any restrictions on the number of hours children under 18 may work, and there are no prohibitions against those under 18 working in hazardous industries or environments.

The government did not effectively enforce applicable law. The Ministry of Labor did not conduct any inspections specifically related to child labor during the year. There were five labor officers in the labor inspectorate with responsibility for monitoring all labor issues and complaints. The ministry reported no complaints related to child labor. Covered under its trafficking-in-persons legislation, penalties for child labor could result in 20 years' imprisonment and were sufficient to deter violations.

There were anecdotal reports of child labor in marijuana production; on family-owned banana plantations, particularly during harvest time; and in family-owned cottage industries. There were also reports of commercial sexual exploitation of children (see section 6, children).

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at www.dol.gov/ilab/reports/child-labor/findings/.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment or Occupation

Labor laws and regulations prohibit discrimination regarding gender and disability, but no laws prohibit discrimination against a person on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV-positive status.

Reportedly, the most common form of employment discrimination occurred with respect to women being underpaid compared with their male counterparts.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Minimum wages, last updated in 2008, varied by sector and type of work. In agriculture the minimum wage for workers provided shelter was \$32 XCD (\$11.85) per day or \$56 XCD (\$20.74) if shelter was not provided; for industrial workers it was \$40 XCD (\$14.81) per day. Most workers earned more than the minimum wage. There is no official poverty income level.

The law prescribes hours of work according to category, such as industrial employees (40 hours per week), professionals (44 hours per week), and agricultural workers (30 to 40 hours per week). The law provides that workers receive time-and-a-half for hours worked over the standard workweek. There was a prohibition against excessive or compulsory overtime, which authorities effectively enforced. The law provides workers with paid holiday leave, and the number of days of entitlement varied according to occupation.

Legislation concerning occupational safety and health was outdated. Workers have the right to remove themselves from unsafe work environments without jeopardizing their employment, but authorities ineffectively enforced this right in practice.

Enforcement of regulations was ineffective. The Department of Labor had five labor inspectors who conducted regular wage and workplace safety inspections. The Ministry of Agriculture conducted inspections and worksite visits in the agriculture sector related to occupational safety and health. While there are fines and other penalties in the labor laws, they are inadequate in many cases, as some legislation was outdated and the fines so small as to be inconsequential. Workers who receive less than the minimum wage can file a claim with the Labor Ministry's inspectors, who investigate and, if warranted, refer the matter to arbitration. The ministry received very few complaints concerning minimum wage violations but received complaints regarding wrongful dismissal.

The department indicated that workplace violations were rare since most employers adhered to the minimum labor standards. The department offered voluntary labor dispute mediation and advised employers and employees of their labor rights through a weekly radio program.

The agricultural sector was considered the most hazardous sector due to workers' exposure to chemicals when working in the field.