

## UPR of Iceland: Concerns over prisons, and discrimination against migrant workers and refugees

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On 10 October 2011, the Working Group on the UPR examined the human rights situation in Iceland. The delegation, numbering six, was led by Ogmundur Jonasson, Minister of the Interior. In his introductory statement the Minister highlighted several key concerns, including significant overcrowding in Icelandic prisons and the necessity of overhauling the detention system, the need to combat domestic violence via judicial reform, and working to close the gender-payment gap in the labour force.

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Specific recommendations, questions, and comments focused on the following issues:

- The need to sign and ratify three international treaties: the *International Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* (CAT), the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR), and the *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance* (CED).
- Urging Iceland to establish a credible National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) with a broad mandate in accordance with the *Principles Relating to the Status of National Institutions* (the Paris Principles).
- Reiterating Iceland's concern for safety in their prison system, along with suggesting a shift in focus to rehabilitation and reintegration.
- Continued pressure on security forces to target human trafficking, particularly child trafficking.
- Praising Iceland's high global ranking on gender wage equality, though sharing Iceland's concern over the recent stagnation of progress in this area.
- Concern for the protection of freedom of religion, particularly in relation to discrimination against citizens who do not subscribe to Lutheranism, Iceland's State religion.
- Applauding Iceland's recent financial reform, citing strong restrictions that will better insulate the State from future financial crises.
- Request for greater protection and assistance for migrant workers, as well as developing more comprehensive anti-discrimination laws.

The delegation of Iceland responded to several of the States' comments. Mr Jonasson acknowledged the high number of recommendations on establishing an NHRI and explicitly told States that he will press his government to begin taking steps towards creating such an institution. On the topic of religion, the delegation adamantly rejected any direct connection between church and state. Religious freedom, the Minister declared, is central to Iceland's human rights agenda. Moreover, the delegation highlighted a survey citing that while over 50% of Icelandic's believe there is discrimination based on race of immigration status, only 26% of those polled had personally witnessed such an occurrence. This suggests that any significant problems with discrimination might be more the result of perception than actual fact.

Nevertheless, the delegation conceded that there were a number of important steps for Iceland to take to improve its human rights situation. Of the 84 recommendations made, 52 were immediately accepted and 32 will be examined with final responses to be given prior to the 19th Human Rights Council in March 2012. No recommendations were rejected.

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