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Beijing Mandates Improved Conditions for Migrant Construction Workers

Earlier this month, the Beijing municipal government issued new labor standards for construction companies employing migrant workers, approximately two million of whom are toiling to remake the city in advance of the 2008 Olympic Games. The move comes just weeks after Human Rights Watch issued a report documenting the myriad abuses against migrant construction workers in China, including unpaid wages, dangerous working conditions, and deplorable living situations. Apparently responding to a number of the issues raised in our report, the government now mandates improved dormitory facilities, monthly transfers of workers' wages, and the provision of adequate safety equipment for migrant workers in Beijing. While the new policies fall short of allowing the formation of independent trade unions and the prosecution of abusive employers, they represent important progress. Leading up to the 2008 Olympic Games, Human Rights Watch continues to challenge China's appalling human rights record. Read more at: <http://china.hrw.org>

Pakistan Commits to Major Human Rights Treaties

In a major move to advance human rights, Pakistan on April 17 ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. During the course of the recent election campaign in Pakistan, Human Rights Watch and other groups pressed the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party to commit to joining the UN conventions. One of the government's first acts upon taking office, the ratifying and signing of the conventions represents a renewed commitment to ensuring a range of rights for the Pakistani people. Read more at: <http://hrw.org/doc/?t=asia&c=pakist>

Russia Blocked from Extraditing Uzbek Nationals to Risk of Torture

In an important judgment issued on April 24, the European Court of Human Rights prohibited Russia from extraditing a group of Uzbek refugees to Uzbekistan, where the refugees feared they would be tortured upon return. The decision in the case of *Ismoilov v. Russia* is a key judgment in the court's growing jurisprudence rejecting diplomatic assurances against torture as unreliable and insufficient. Human Rights Watch supported the Russian lawyers defending the Uzbek men and, working closely with the London-based AIRE Centre, directly intervened in the case with an amicus (friend-of-the-court) brief to the European Court. The *Ismoilov* judgment cited liberally from our brief, arguing that Uzbekistan's diplomatic assurances against torture were inherently unreliable. It also acknowledged the value of fact-finding by nongovernmental human rights organizations, and directly referenced Human Rights Watch's documentation of torture in Uzbekistan. Read more at: <http://hrw.org/doc/?t=europe&c=uzbeki>

Colombia Extends Benefits to Same-Sex Couples

In an important victory in the struggle for equal rights for same-sex couples, Colombia's Constitutional Court extended health and pension benefits to same-sex partners in an April 17 ruling. At the request of local rights groups, Human Rights Watch submitted an amicus brief in the case, supporting the applicant's claim that laws that deny benefits for same-sex couples are unconstitutional and in violation of international law. Human Rights Watch's brief called on Colombia to adhere to international standards for protecting the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people, as articulated in the Yogyakarta Principles, which outlines international human rights law as it relates to sexual orientation and gender identity. The Court's ruling creates a broader legal framework to guarantee equal rights for same-sex partnerships, and sets a precedent for drawing on the Yogyakarta Principles in domestic litigation. Read more at: <http://www.hrw.org/doc/?t=lgbt>

Saudi Activist Blogger Freed After Four Months in Jail

On April 27, Saudi Arabia's most widely-read blogger, Fouad al-Farhan, was released after serving 137 days in prison without charge. Prior to his arrest, Farhan had used his blog to publicly condemn the widespread corruption within the Saudi justice system and to criticize the arrest of nine political reform advocates. After authorities warned him to tone down his online writings, Farhan was arrested, sparking both fear and a sense of empowerment among fellow bloggers. Human Rights Watch, along with other rights groups and activists, called on Saudi authorities to release Farhan, and, in March, issued a report detailing violations of the rights to due process and a fair trial throughout Saudi Arabia. While it is uncertain what motivated the release, the heightened attention to the flaws in Saudi Arabia's justice system seems to have increased pressure on the monarchy to improve respect for basic human rights in this case. Read more at: <http://hrw.org/doc/?t=mideast&c=saudia>

IN THE NEWS Op-Eds by Our Staff

The CIA Must Be Held Accountable

Writing in *salon.com*, Terrorism and Counterterrorism Program Director Joanne Mariner presents a harrowing account of torture from a man the CIA handed over to Jordan. Read more at: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2008/04/10/usint18508.htm>

EU Must Deliver on Pledge to Victims of Darfur

In light of the growing defiance of Khartoum, including granting government posts to people accused of war crimes, European Union Advocacy Director Lotte Leicht, writing in the *New Statesman Online*, calls on the EU to follow through on its threats to impose sanctions on Sudan. Read more at: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2008/04/02/sudan18426.htm>

Nepal's New Government Must Provide Justice for Victims of Abuse

Meenakshi Ganguly, senior researcher on South Asia, writing in *opendemocracy.net*, challenges the new Maoist government of Nepal to confront human rights abuses within its own ranks as a crucial test for becoming a true democracy. Read more at: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2008/04/29/nepal18664.htm>

US Congress Should Stand Firm on Colombia

Writing in *The Huffington Post*, Maria McFarland, senior researcher on Colombia, urges the US Congress to stand firm and reject the US-Colombia free trade deal until Colombia shows concrete evidence of improved human rights protections. Read more at: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2008/04/09/colomb18549.htm>

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