

2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cambodia

CAMBODIA (Tier 3)

The Government of Cambodia does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so; therefore Cambodia remained on Tier 3. Despite the lack of significant efforts, the government took some steps to address trafficking, including opening a victim support center, cooperating with foreign governments on anti-trafficking investigations, and launching an online trafficking victim identification training course available to government officials. However, corruption and official complicity – including by high-level senior government officials – in trafficking crimes remained widespread and endemic during the reporting period; this included the exploitation of tens of thousands of victims in forced criminality in online scam operations in Cambodia. Officials actively impeded countervailing efforts, including reportedly undermining anti-trafficking law enforcement and victim protection efforts and dispelling reported accusations through minimization and denial in public messaging of the prevalence and severity of online scam operations, including reports of government complicity. Some senior government officials and advisors owned – either directly or through businesses – properties and facilities known to be utilized by online scam operators used to exploit victims in labor trafficking and financially benefitted directly from these crimes. Involvement of officials and economic elites resulted in selective and politically motivated enforcement of laws, inhibiting effective law enforcement action against trafficking crimes, which remained widespread during the year. The government consistently failed to screen foreign and Cambodian workers for trafficking indicators and selectively intervened in cases involving foreign victims from online scam operations, and often only when foreign governments applied consistent advocacy for their citizens. In addition, authorities provided selective referrals of foreign potential labor trafficking victims of online scam operations to services, and officials reportedly inappropriately penalized such potential victims for crimes committed as a direct result of being trafficked by holding these victims in prolonged detention and, in some cases, also re-trafficking them into further exploitation until they paid bribes to police for release, or a foreign embassy funded their return flights home. The government appointed individuals with past and ongoing public allegations of official complicity in human trafficking-related cases to positions overseeing, or with significant influence over, the government's anti-trafficking response. The government did not report prosecuting any labor traffickers despite widespread reporting across multiple industries of adult and child labor trafficking. Authorities did not investigate or hold criminally accountable any officials involved in widespread, credible reports of complicity, in particular with unscrupulous business owners who subjected thousands of men, women, and children throughout the country to human trafficking in brick kilns and entertainment establishments.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Investigate and prosecute traffickers involved in forced labor crimes in online scam operations, including complicit officials. * Fully implement victim identification guidelines, apply them to domestic and foreign suspected victims, and train officials in all areas of the country on their use. * Screen all individuals in immigrant detention or custody for human trafficking indicators, including foreign workers, men and boys, LGBTQI+ individuals, and persons with disabilities. * Investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms. * Increase funding to anti-trafficking law enforcement units and disburse it in advance of investigations, rather than by reimbursement. * Allocate increased resources to anti-human trafficking police to better facilitate the monitoring of defendants released under judicial supervision pending trial. * Increase or initiate unannounced labor inspections in high-vulnerability professions, especially in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and at brick kilns, entertainment venues, construction sites, and plantations, with a focus on identifying labor

trafficking and debt bondage and holding business owners accountable to the law. * Increase the availability of services for male victims, especially men and boys exploited in commercial fishing abroad. * Incentivize domestic and foreign victims' participation in criminal and civil proceedings, including by establishing a victim's fund and granting permission to work, temporary residency, or other relevant immigration status to foreign victims wishing to remain in country during proceedings. * Implement a system for monitoring, collecting, and reporting data on anti-trafficking prosecution and victim protection efforts, and disseminate data among the relevant government agencies in a manner that protects victims' identities and privacy. * Eliminate recruitment or placement fees charged to workers by Cambodian labor recruiters and ensure they are instead paid by employers. * Increase inspection and oversight of lending institutions, including private micro-finance organizations, to reduce vulnerability to debt-based coercion among economically disadvantaged communities. * Allow restitution upon conviction of the trafficker and establish and train relevant officials on procedures for calculating and granting restitution. * Establish and allocate resources to implement systematic procedures at diplomatic missions to assist Cambodian victims abroad, including in countries without Cambodian diplomatic representation. * Amend regulations on labor recruitment licensure and contract requirements to include strengthened language on worker protections and labor rights. * Strengthen efforts to inspect private labor recruitment agencies and their sub-licensed brokers for fraudulent recruitment and other trafficking indicators. * Incorporate NGO input into the policy for formally transferring custody of child victims.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained inadequate law enforcement efforts; official complicity remained a significant concern. The 2008 Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of seven to 15 years' imprisonment for offenses involving an adult victim and 15 to 20 years' imprisonment for those involving a child victim; these penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape. NGOs reported that in practice the government did not issue criminal penalties under the anti-trafficking law for labor traffickers; instead, it utilized the labor law to issue fines and/or short jail sentences of six days to one month, which did not represent sufficient punishment to deter future crimes or provide justice for victims.

The government did not maintain a centralized record or database of investigations and judicial proceedings; therefore, overall law enforcement data was incomplete. The government reported investigating 27 trafficking cases, nine of which remained ongoing by the end of the reporting period. The government did not report an update on the three month police operation to investigate 600 human trafficking cases across the country from the previous reporting period, including whether any prosecutions or victim identification resulted from those investigations. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) personnel manually collected prosecution and conviction data from each district court throughout the country. In 2023, the government reported initiating prosecutions for approximately 600 suspected traffickers involved in 354 cases, but did not disaggregate between prosecutions conducted under the anti-trafficking law and non-trafficking laws, or by type of trafficking. The government did not report prosecuting any labor trafficking cases. This compared with 88 total cases prosecuted under the anti-trafficking law in 2022; 16 of which involved sex trafficking, 24 involved forced labor, and 48 involved unspecified forms of trafficking. The government reported it convicted 109 traffickers under the trafficking law, but did not provide disaggregated data for type of trafficking; this compared with 174 traffickers convicted in 2022, including 13 for sex trafficking and 42 for forced labor. As in prior reporting periods, judicial authorities may have included cases of rape and other crimes outside the international definition of trafficking in their reported data; therefore, the true number of trafficking prosecutions and convictions was likely lower than reported. Courts also may have convicted in absentia traffickers who evaded arrest. The law allowed for retrials for suspects who evaded arrest and were convicted in absentia, and observers reported courts often acquitted traffickers convicted in absentia upon retrial because of corruption and official complicity. The government reported they did not have

trafficking-specific courts or specialized prosecutors, but all prosecutors received trafficking-specific training.

Nationwide law enforcement authorities often did not effectively investigate or prosecute suspected traffickers despite credible allegations because of resource constraints and official complicity. As previously reported, some defendants may have fled prior to their trial dates as judicial police lacked resources to monitor them when released on “judicial supervision” pending trial; courts tried and convicted such suspected traffickers in absentia. Authorities rarely issued arrest warrants for absconded defendants unless NGOs assisted in tracking and apprehending them. Cambodian criminal procedural code featured no guidelines, monitoring provisions, or language outlining specific law enforcement duties with regard to judicial supervision. Citing resource constraints, prosecutors and investigating judges did not advance all of the trafficking cases for which police had supplied evidence. The government increased anti-trafficking operations in provinces outside the capital, but rural and remote communities did not benefit from equitable implementation of the law because of official complicity and corruption, as law enforcement in these regions did not prosecute alleged traffickers with connections to government officials.

The government reported conducting 315 law enforcement patrols in locations of suspected sex trafficking, including guesthouses, massage parlors, and karaoke bars, but did not report whether it screened for or identified any trafficking victims. Law enforcement actions on establishments where authorities believed sex trafficking occurred were sometimes unsuccessful because of advanced warning from local police. Some police reportedly protected the establishments in exchange for monthly payments from the business owners or commercial sex acts from potential victims. Authorities often overlooked, denied, or downplayed labor abuses – including forced child labor – in factories and at brick kilns, and colluded with brick manufacturers to arrest, jail, and return indentured laborers who had attempted to escape. Civil society also noted with concern the appointment of a government official to a high-level law enforcement position overseeing the government’s trafficking response who had been indicted previously for accepting bribes and protecting brothel owners in child commercial sexual exploitation; the case was not prosecuted. The courts convicted the official’s subordinate of similar charges, but ultimately overturned the conviction in a previous reporting period.

The government reported the MOJ continued to operate a special working group to monitor and investigate reports of large human trafficking operations in “high risk” areas, including Preah Sihanouk, Banteay Meanchey, Oddar Meanchey, Svay Rieng, Takeo, and Kandal provinces. Observers reported government officials with knowledge of police operations alerted the online scam operators prior to police law enforcement actions. NGOs reported high-ranking officials harassed and intimidated human trafficking advocates involved in combating forced labor in online scam operations. Authorities reported removing an unspecified number of deputy chiefs from duty for extorting money from online scam operations.

The government reported the Anti-Human Trafficking Juvenile Police (AHTJP) cooperated with foreign governments, including the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Thailand, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada on investigations, but it did not disaggregate data between labor disputes and human trafficking crimes. Foreign governments reported the government’s cooperation on investigating reported trafficking of foreign nationals in online scam operations and supporting the removal of specified victims from such compounds; in one case, however, observers reported a high-level government official requested financial payment from a foreign government to investigate a compound holding their citizens. The government cooperated with a foreign government to investigate a group of “tourists” (27 Philippine nationals, three PRC nationals, one Malaysian national, and six Cambodian nationals) in Cambodia. The 27 Philippine nationals did not have possession of their passports and reported inconsistent information on the situation; the General Commissariat of the National Police reportedly referred these 27 to the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans, and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSAVY) for victims services. The government also maintained formal bilateral agreements and MOUs outlining cross-border anti-trafficking efforts, including information sharing, investigations, and prosecutions, with India, Malaysia, the PRC, Thailand, and Vietnam. The government finalized a police cooperation MOU with Indonesia and five other ASEAN country members that included anti-trafficking provisions.

The government continued to cooperate with a foreign government through a law enforcement task force dedicated to combating online child sexual exploitation and other child sex crimes.

The government – in collaboration with and through funding from NGOs and other donors – increased training for police, prosecutors, judges, and other government officials on anti-trafficking laws, investigative techniques, evidence collection, victim identification, and protection guidelines. During the reporting period, the government reported launching an online trafficking victim identification training course available to government officials. Many police – particularly in rural areas – remained unaware of how to conduct anti-trafficking work, as most did not receive training on basic law enforcement techniques. Moreover, law enforcement and judicial officials lacked the necessary equipment to handle trafficking cases appropriately, including vehicles, computer and communications equipment, and forensic tools. As a result, criminals’ technical sophistication in hiding and destroying evidence during police law enforcement actions limited the collection of evidence and hindered the government’s ability to prosecute perpetrators. The government required the funding of all anti-trafficking investigative work to be conducted through reimbursement, forcing individual police units to cover relevant expenses with personal funds. NGOs reported some officers waited months for this reimbursement, which was sometimes not repaid in full, and the ensuing financial hardships made some police units more susceptible to corruption. As previously reported, local organizations and some officials continued to stress an urgent need for more sophisticated evidence collection techniques – including more undercover investigations – to decrease reliance on witness testimony and improve efforts to detect and combat sex trafficking. MOJ officials reported their concern that revising the law or issuing new regulations to specifically authorize undercover investigative authority in trafficking cases could lead to abuse of power by the police.

The government did not investigate, prosecute, or convict government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes. Corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes at many levels of government remained significant concerns, hindering law enforcement action and perpetuating impunity during the year. Observers reported some local authorities, law enforcement, and security forces directly facilitated trafficking crimes by colluding with criminal networks. NGOs continued to report trafficking victims accused Cambodian officials of conspiring with labor brokers to commit trafficking crimes. NGOs also continued to allege police and other officials were complicit in online scam operations that forced thousands of PRC, Southeast Asian, and other foreign nationals to work in “call centers” in Sihanoukville and other locations. Observers reported instances of customs and immigration officials accepting bribes from traffickers to facilitate trafficking victims’ entry into Cambodia; traffickers then primarily exploited these victims in online scam operations. Observers reported prosecutors and judges accepted bribes in return for dismissal of charges, acquittals, and reduced sentencing. Corrupt officials often thwarted progress in cases where the perpetrators reportedly had political, criminal, or economic ties to senior government officials.

Institutionalized corruption and official complicity in labor trafficking and forced criminality persisted. Some high-level senior government officials, family members of senior officials, and elite business executives with close relationships with senior officials across agencies reportedly were involved with and benefitted from online scam operations or owned properties on which online scam compounds operated. Involvement of such officials and elites resulted in selective and politically motivated enforcement of laws, which inhibited effective law enforcement action against operations which remained widespread during the year. Observers reported such compounds often received advanced warning of impending law enforcement actions, were not investigated, or required local law enforcement to receive permission from high-level government officials to enter, therefore giving compound operators time to impede operations and move victims. The government carried out a pattern of intimidating victims and civil society, including intimidating local officials attempting to investigate or hold high-level government officials or individuals with close ties to high-level senior government officials criminally accountable. The government impeded civil society efforts to support trafficking victims. Government officials publicly denounced victim accounts, victim credibility, reporting by international organizations, and civil society reporting on the prevalence and severity of online scam operations and in previous reporting periods. Despite widespread reporting of forced criminality in online scam compounds in Ko Kong, Sihanoukville,

O'Smach, and other locations along the Cambodia-Thailand border and along the coast, law enforcement did not charge any high-level officials, compound operators, or complicit landlords of the compound properties. Law enforcement conducted actions on online scam compounds, but often did not properly screen for trafficking indicators among potential victims; rather, officials reportedly inappropriately penalized such potential victims for crimes committed as a direct result of being trafficked by holding these victims in indefinite detention, and, in some cases, also re-trafficking them into further exploitation until they paid bribes or ransom to police for release, they escaped, or their foreign embassy funded their return flights home. Civil society raised alarm concerning government officials' attempts to intimidate and penalize civil society actors working to support victims in online scam compounds and raise awareness of the issue.

PROTECTION

The government maintained inadequate victim protection efforts. The government reported identifying 142 victims or potential victims in 2023; the government also reported identifying 214 victims of forced marriage, for whom there may have been corollary indicators of trafficking victimization. While the law specified individuals could not be confirmed as trafficking victims until a criminal trial had ended with a conviction, the government could formally designate potential victims as "suspected victims" to allow them to receive services, including legal services. The government reported screening other vulnerable groups, including workers in online scam operations, for trafficking indicators; observers reported inadequate victim screening for online scam compounds and noted the government was more likely to screen victims if the compound was not connected to a powerful government official or advisor. Foreign diplomats in the capital reported receiving hundreds of leads from potential victims trapped in online scam operations seeking assistance; Cambodian officials only acted to remove potential victims from compounds in cases when embassy officials provided details on the potential victims' location and identity. Foreign diplomats also reported authorities did not identify other potential victims at these locations or shut down online scam compounds even after accessing them to remove named potential victims. NGOs reported the government ceased acting on civil society reports and publicly announced it would only follow up on foreign government requests to search for victims in online scam compounds. In selective cases, authorities reportedly responded when directly contacted by the victim, victims' families, the victims' governments, or third party private citizens. In such cases, the authorities would not remove all victims from compounds – only the victims a foreign government or family member requested support for – and did not further investigate or shut down the online scam compound. As of the end of the reporting period, the government has never arrested and prosecuted an online scam compound operator or an owner of a compound.

The MOSAVY had victim identification guidelines, but law enforcement agencies' victim identification, referral, and repatriation efforts remained disparate and underdeveloped, and the government's procedures were inadequate for foreign victims. Observers reported officials often did not follow established victim identification procedures for foreign victims recovered from online scam operation compounds, and instead detained and deported them without screening for human trafficking indicators or providing appropriate services. The government classified many of these cases as "labor disputes" instead of human trafficking. Due to insufficient victim identification efforts, authorities penalized potential foreign victims for immigration offenses committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Some potential victims removed from online scam operations claimed police told them authorities would not allow them to return to their home countries if they officially reported their exploitation; authorities instead directed them to say they wanted to quit their jobs in the online scam operation, effectively directing them to hide their victim status.

MOSAVY officials regularly accompanied police during law enforcement activities, such as proactive law enforcement actions, to provide assistance to identified victims; if they were not present, police could screen for trafficking indicators and refer victims to a MOSAVY office. However, MOSAVY officials did not report participating in any coordinated law enforcement activities involving online scam operation compounds, including the previously mentioned large-scale, MOJ-formed special working group operation that began in August 2022. NGOs reported the

Anti Commercial and Gambling Unit led most of the operation activities to remove potential victims from these compounds, rarely screened for trafficking, and did not coordinate with the MOSAVY to place victims in shelters; authorities instead treated potential victims as undocumented migrants or civil plaintiffs. Local police sometimes referred victims directly to NGOs, who reported the overall referral process was quick and victims could access NGO-run shelters within hours of being identified. Despite this process, the government continued to implement a regulation barring NGOs from representing individuals seeking formal recognition as trafficking victims. Under this arrangement, authorities required victims to seek formal identification from the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to access protection services. Some NGOs reported a lack of cooperation from authorities, which hindered their operations. The government's referral procedures were inadequate for foreign potential victims recovered from online scam operation compounds. Authorities often designated foreign victims as undocumented migrants and placed them in detention.

In December 2023, the government opened a victim support center in Banteay Meanchey province to provide services – including temporary shelter, healthcare, and vocational training – for trafficking victims; however, the government did not report whether it provided such services to any victims. Trainings for the shelter utilized NGO funding and support. MOSAVY continued to operate the migrant transit center in the border town of Poipet; the government did not report identifying any victims in this center. MOSAVY reported partnering with local law enforcement and referring 436 individuals – which included 86 victims of labor exploitation and individuals with vulnerabilities to trafficking – to NGO shelters for reintegration support services, an increase from 91 individuals in the previous reporting period. Between January and September 2023, the government also referred 356 victims and suspected trafficking victims to NGO-provided social services; however, the data includes 214 victims that offenders subjected to forced marriage – it did not report how many of these were foreign victims. The government's trafficking victim assistance policy entitled victims to a food allowance of 150,000 riel (\$37), living stipend of 120,000 riel (\$30) for three months, job training, and reintegration assistance, but – as in the previous reporting period – MOSAVY did not allocate sufficient funding to provide all of these supports and relied heavily on financial contributions from NGOs to cover these services. The government did not have the capacity or resources available to provide adequate protection services, including shelter, to trafficking victims; therefore, it continued to rely heavily on donor countries, international organizations, and NGOs to provide or support provision of such services to trafficking victims. MOSAVY maintained guidelines outlining minimum standards for residential care of trafficking victims. MOSAVY also managed long-term care and other assistance for child trafficking victims who could not reintegrate into their communities, but it did not operate any trafficking shelters for child victims; instead, the government relied on two NGOs to provide such shelter. The government, however, did not facilitate formal transfer of the custody of child trafficking victims to NGOs, leaving NGOs that accepted child victims into their care vulnerable to court action. Provisions allowing for financial settlements in lieu of harsher sentencing further discouraged some families from consenting to temporary guardianship at shelters; absent family consent, government officials at times returned children to high-risk environments, leaving them vulnerable to re-victimization. The government authorized public health facilities to provide free medical services to all migrant workers in Cambodia, including foreign trafficking victims; this policy relieved NGOs of the financial burden of providing medical care to this vulnerable population. The government had only limited services, including shelters, for male labor trafficking victims. However, the government continued to cooperate with an NGO to provide services to male victims exploited in the Thai commercial fishing industry. Service provider NGOs noted an acute lack of reintegration services and cultural stigma surrounding the experience of forced labor at sea catalyzed re-trafficking of fishermen returning home.

The government continued to provide basic care to or assist in the repatriation of Cambodian victims exploited abroad, but it relied on donor organizations to finance the repatriation. The Social Affairs Ministry reported helping repatriate 90 labor trafficking victims back to Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, but did provide further detail on those cases. Cambodian diplomatic missions overseas also lacked adequate funding and capacity to provide basic assistance to or repatriate victims; some victims were reportedly unable to secure assistance from Cambodian consular services overseas because of unattended hotlines and unresponsive staff. Victims identified in countries without Cambodian diplomatic representation had access to even less support. The

government signed an agreement with Thailand finalizing SOPs on the repatriation and reintegration of Cambodian trafficking victims, with support from an international organization. In 2023, the MOI did not publicly report working with PRC authorities to repatriate Cambodian women recruited through false promises of work in the PRC and forced into marriages with PRC nationals.

The government required the repatriation of foreign victims, except in rare cases, and did not have legal alternatives to removal to countries in which they would face retribution or hardship. While government policy previously ensured foreign victims awaiting repatriation could have temporary residence at NGO shelters, the government did not identify victims removed from online scam operation compounds as potential victims, precluding their access to shelters. In some cases, the government prevented civil society from providing victims services referrals for NGOs to victims held in detention centers. Media reported police demanded detained victims pay fees for basic amenities, including food, and demanded payments from victims for their release from detention; some victims claimed they paid 20,255 riel (\$5) for meals and 4.05-12.15 million riel (\$1,000-\$3,000) for their release from detention centers. Media reported the government cooperated with foreign authorities from Indonesian, India, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, to repatriate victims from online scam operations.

The government reported it did not require trafficking victims to participate in trafficking investigations or prosecutions to receive protection services; however, an observer reported this occurred on a case-by-case basis. The government reported 46 survivors participated in prosecutions against alleged traffickers. NGOs reported government-appointed attorneys did not give adequate attention to trafficking cases because the government did not compensate them for their work on these cases; as previously reported, some victims only met with their assigned attorneys on trial hearing days. There were no legal provisions to offer work permits, temporary residency, or other immigration status to foreign victims wishing to remain in Cambodia to participate in civil or criminal proceedings. As in previous years, Cambodia's weak and corrupt judicial system and the lack of any victim and witness protection, exacerbated by a lengthy trial process and fear of retaliation by traffickers, hindered victims' willingness to cooperate in many cases. NGOs reported victims preferred out-of-court settlements over court proceedings as the fastest way to obtain monetary compensation. Restitution was difficult to obtain because of a legal requirement delaying payment until after the completion of a trafficker's jail term; convicted traffickers frequent abscondment further complicated this arrangement. Observers noted Cambodia lacked an SOP for determining how to calculate restitution or compensation. Victims rarely received the amount promised, and many victims' families settled out of court with traffickers or accepted bribes to drop the relevant charges. The government did not report ordering any convicted traffickers to pay restitution in 2023; the government cooperated with two NGOs to secure 37.67 million riel (\$9,300) in restitution for trafficking victims in 2022. The government did not have a victim compensation fund available, and victims could only receive compensation from the trafficker through court-mandated actions. NGOs also reported judges had inadequate knowledge of victim-centered and trauma-informed approaches to engaging with victims in courtroom settings; this led to the re-traumatization of child and adult trafficking victims.

PREVENTION

The government maintained prevention efforts. The National Committee for Counter Trafficking (NCCT) and its secretariat coordinated anti-trafficking activities and began drafting a 2024-2028 anti-trafficking NAP. The NCCT produced an annual report documenting the government's anti-trafficking efforts; the NCCT made the report available to the public. The NCCT chaired 295 meetings in 2023 with various ministries to elevate the importance of human trafficking in the government, compared with 344 in 2022. The NCCT reported invited trafficking survivors to attend meetings and workshops to improve policies through survivors' expertise and recommendations. The secretariat of the NCCT maintained six working groups to monitor the efforts of the interagency committee, as well as those of its provincial subcommittees. Subsidiary provincial committees to counter trafficking (PCCT), four of which continued to receive modest central government funds, coordinated efforts at the local level to mirror the activities of the NAP. Each

PCCT maintained customized provincial-level action plans outlining how to report cases of trafficking to police, victim protection efforts, and prevention activities. The NCCT and various PCCTs – in cooperation with relevant ministries and international organization and NGO partners – trained government officials on anti-trafficking laws, investigation techniques, evidence collection, strategies to combat human trafficking, victim identification, protection of rights for trafficking victims, child protection, safe migration, and repatriation of suspected trafficking victims. A Monitoring Working Group continued to strengthen the work of the NCCT at the provincial level by meeting with provincial officials and assessing areas of improvement. The government trained Cambodian diplomatic personnel on trafficking as a part of their orientation prior to deploying abroad, and raised awareness for diplomats abroad to assess suspicious marriage certificates. The government did not report its anti-trafficking budget in 2023; the budget was approximately 2.2 billion riels (\$543,080) in 2020, the last year for which data was available. As in the previous year, NGOs reported the government’s inadequate funding for anti-trafficking activities led some NGOs to cover the expenses of government activities.

The government – in collaboration with various donors and civil society, including NGOs – disseminated information about trafficking laws, safe migration, child labor, and strategies to combat trafficking to law enforcement, other government personnel, and the general population. In partnership with NGOs, the NCCT reported propagating 167,207 anti-trafficking awareness messages across the country, including radio broadcasts and incorporated into thousands of public events (such as town halls and community council meetings and including National Human Trafficking Day television and radio broadcasts and public school events), and senior officials spoke publicly about human trafficking in general terms. The government used local press outlets to share public statements from senior public officials’ commitment to addressing human trafficking; however, no state-sponsored outlets covered human trafficking issues directly. Senior officials acknowledged online scam operations existed in the country and remained a problem but made public statements dismissing the large scale and prevalence of such operations.

The AHTJP and MOI continued to operate a hotline and a social media page to report human trafficking crimes. The government reported 26 foreign nationals contacted the hotlines and social media pages, “suspected to be victims of human trafficking,” but did not report whether hotline or social media communications resulted in any victim identifications or investigations as a result of preliminary reporting; no data was provided in 2022. The government reported an increase in engagement via social media platforms and the Cambodian National Police (CNP) website, which received more than 1,300 complaints of suspected human trafficking, and reported they did not receive any complaints from scam victims. The government did not report if these complaints resulted in trafficking investigations, victim identifications, or referrals to service. The Ministries of Labor and Foreign Affairs operated hotlines for Cambodians working abroad to seek assistance and report cases of human trafficking, but it did not report how many calls Cambodian embassies received during 2023. Observers reported officials pressured NGOs and independent public media outlets to not discuss or report on human trafficking crimes, including on forced criminality in online scam operations.

The government did not prohibit the imposition of worker-paid recruitment or placement fees. Observers noted the high costs, complex administrative requirements, and restrictive provisions inherent to formal migration paths drove most Cambodian labor migrants to pursue informal pathways to working abroad. The Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training (MOLVT) trained recruitment agencies and labor brokers on ethical recruitment practices to protect the rights of migrant workers. The government reported conducting labor inspections but did not report screening for or identifying any labor trafficking victims through these efforts. The MOLVT maintained offices at the provincial level to monitor recruitment agencies and address complaints from workers, including potential incidents of trafficking; however, it did not report how many complaints these offices received in 2023. The government also did not conduct inspections of recruitment agencies allegedly involved in trafficking crimes.

The MOLVT reported that it had conducted 1,328 pre-departure orientation briefings to 52,184 Cambodians migrating abroad for work, including 21,978 women, between January and December 2023, more than doubling the number of briefings and participants from 2022. According to some

NGOs working on human trafficking, many Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand were reportedly unaware of how to apply for travel documentation or how much it should cost – leaving them at higher risk of travel through informal, more vulnerable means – and the government did not take sufficient steps to publicize that information. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MFAIC) continued to implement consular screening measures to reduce the sex and labor trafficking of Cambodian women via forced and fraudulent marriages, including by assessing applicants against trafficking victim profiles jointly developed with the PRC in 2016. However, the MFAIC did not report identifying potential victims during these screenings. The government also continued implementing a regulation passed in 2018 requiring foreign men to pay a fee if intending to return to their home countries with a Cambodian spouse; as previously reported and because this regulation only applied to air travel, observers reported an increase in the number of Cambodian women traveling through unsafe overland channels for marriage migration to the PRC.

The MOLVT maintained an action plan aimed at reducing child labor and debt bondage in the service, agricultural, mining, and energy sectors by 2025 through awareness raising, legal action, and collaboration with civil society funded in part through the national budget. MOLVT officials continued to deny the existence of child labor – including forced child labor – and debt-based coercion in the brick industry. The MOLVT reported conducting 400 inspections in 2023 of brick kilns, but for the second consecutive year did not report identifying any trafficking victims or cases of vulnerable children living on the kilns. Observers stated police were often unaware that detection of crimes at brick kilns fell under their investigative purview or feared reprisals for conducting investigations or making any arrests; the AHTJP viewed brick kiln inspections as under the MOLVT's purview and would only investigate kilns if the MOLVT referred a case to them. The AHTJP did not report any such referrals. Authorities often conducted inspections with advance notification to the kiln owners, enabling them to avoid fines or conceal abuses by removing children from the kilns before an inspection. The government continued to produce public-facing materials targeting potential consumers of commercial sex with children. The CNP maintained teams of anti-trafficking and cybercrime specialists in each province to investigate cases involving online child sexual exploitation (OCSE). The government – in coordination with an NGO – also worked with local tuk tuk and taxi drivers to receive reports of suspected human trafficking and child exploitation at hotels and guesthouses. However, as in prior years, the government generally focused on deterring foreign perpetrators of extraterritorial child sexual exploitation and abuse, rather than targeting the local population that constituted the main source of demand for commercial sex with children in Cambodia. The government did not report denying entry to any foreign convicted sex offenders, compared with denial of entry to four the previous reporting period.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Cambodia, and traffickers exploit victims from Cambodia abroad. NGOs and labor unions reported in 2020 that foreign labor brokers fraudulently recruit foreign migrants, including from Bangladesh, the PRC, and Nepal, to work in PRC-invested and other construction sites in Cambodia, where some are indebted to recruitment firms and experience passport confiscation. Traffickers also exploit Cambodians and foreign nationals in forced criminality in online scam operations run by locally operated PRC national organized crime syndicates in call centers located in Cambodia. Increasingly, these traffickers use the Internet and social media to fraudulently recruit adults and children from Cambodia, the PRC, and other countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the Western Hemisphere, for high-paying technical jobs abroad and subsequently force them to engage in online gambling, cryptocurrency, Internet romance, and telephone scams, primarily in large commercial compounds in Cambodia. Traffickers often lure foreign victims to Cambodia with false job offers, only to subject them to forced detention and criminality. Brokers move victims through airports, overland, or by sea into Cambodia. Traffickers subject these workers to punishment for poor performance and disobedience, including, but not limited to, physical abuse and torture, sexual abuse, pay docking, and debt bondage, and may “resell” those who cannot meet sales quotas or repay recruitment debts to other criminal networks for forced labor in similar fraud schemes, domestic servitude, or sex trafficking. NGOs estimate as many as 100,000 workers are

exploited in forced labor in these compounds in Cambodia, noting the number is likely conservative. These compounds are largely clustered in the port city of Sihanoukville, an SEZ under a Belt and Road Initiative agreement between Cambodia and the PRC, but there are dozens of additional compounds throughout Cambodia, primarily along the borders with Thailand and Laos. In response to the Cambodian government's August 2022 operation to target and investigate these online scam operation compounds, traffickers moved from Sihanoukville to more rural areas, including to other PRC-invested SEZs, where they encountered less scrutiny by the government and NGOs and victims have less chance of escape. Media and civil society reporting indicates compounds have consolidated and returned in full force to Sihanoukville and other locations along the Cambodia-Thailand border by the end of 2023.

Cambodian adults and children migrate to other countries in the region and increasingly to the Middle East for work; traffickers force many – often through debt-based coercion – to work on fishing vessels, in agriculture, in construction, in factories, and in domestic service, or exploit them in sex trafficking. Migrants moving outside of regular migration channels, predominantly with the assistance of unlicensed brokers, are at an increased risk of trafficking, although those using licensed recruiting agents also become victims of forced labor or sex trafficking. Companies operating under the auspices of the Japanese government's "Technical Intern Training Program" exploit Cambodian nationals in forced labor in food processing, manufacturing, construction, and fishing. Children from impoverished families are vulnerable to forced labor, often with the complicity of their families, including in domestic service and forced begging or street vending in Thailand and Vietnam. Undocumented Cambodian labor migrants working in Thailand – who constituted an estimated 30-40 percent of the 1.5 to two million Cambodians there before the COVID-19 pandemic – are at a high risk of trafficking because of their immigration status, as are undocumented Cambodians working in Vietnam.

Traffickers continue to recruit significant numbers of Cambodian men and boys in Thailand to work on fishing boats and exploit them in forced labor on Thai-owned and -operated vessels in international waters. Cambodian victims escaping from traffickers have been identified in Fiji, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mauritius, Papua New Guinea, Senegal, and South Africa. Cambodian men working on Thai-owned and -operated fishing vessels report deceptive recruitment tactics, severe physical abuse, underpayment or nonpayment of wages, restricted access to medical care, and confinement at sea for years at a time without permission to come ashore. Traffickers recruit women and some girls from rural areas under false pretenses to travel to the PRC to enter into marriages with PRC-national men. These women incur thousands of dollars of debt to brokers facilitating the transaction; the men force some of these women to work in factories or exploit them in sex trafficking to repay this debt. Some parents reportedly receive between 6.08-12.15 million riel (\$1,500 and \$3,000) from marriage brokers to send their daughters to the PRC for marriage. Cambodian women serving willingly as illegal surrogates for PRC families are vulnerable to confinement and domestic servitude. Stateless persons, namely in ethnic Vietnamese communities, are at a higher risk of trafficking because of a lack of identity documentation necessary for access to formal employment, education, marriage registration, the court system, or the right to own land.

The proprietors of brick kilns subject many of the more than 10,000 Cambodians living at such kilns, including nearly 4,000 children, to multigenerational debt-based coercion, either by buying off their pre-existing loans, or by requiring them to take out new loans as a condition of employment or to cover medical expenses resulting from injuries incurred while working. NGO reports in 2019 and 2021 have confirmed cases of child labor – including forced child labor – in brick kilns, as children are forced to work alongside their parents through debt-based coercion. An extensive, largely unregulated network of predatory micro-finance organizations and private creditors contributes to this arrangement by proactively advertising loans to families in vulnerable communities and connecting them with the kilns. Rural farming families are at a higher risk of this form of forced labor because of economic hardships ensuing from climate change. Unseasonal rain patterns and the subsequent loss of crops push many farmers to take out large loans for new irrigation or pesticide systems, and brick kiln owners often purchase these loans as a means of securing and retaining their labor. Extended rainy seasons also delay the brick-drying process, reducing these bonded kiln workers' pay and forcing many to become further indebted to the kiln owners. To dissuade workers from fleeing abusive conditions, some kiln owners reportedly allow

only select members of family units to be absent for public holidays or to seek medical care at any given time. Some workers report continued confinement and forced labor in the kilns long after they repaid their debts. Cambodian families may also experience conditions indicative of forced labor in the clay extraction process required for brick making. Traffickers exploit children as young as 13 in domestic servitude and in brothels to pay off family debts accrued through this system. Communities displaced by illegal logging operations supplying the brick kilns with timber for fuel may be at elevated risk of trafficking, including in logging itself and elsewhere as a result of ensuing economic hardships.

Traffickers may exploit victims from all of Cambodia's 25 provinces in human trafficking. Sex trafficking is largely clandestine; Cambodian and ethnic Vietnamese women and girls move from rural areas to cities and tourist destinations, where criminals exploit them in sex trafficking in brothels and, more frequently, clandestine sex establishments at beer gardens, massage parlors, salons, karaoke bars, retail spaces, and non-commercial sites. In recent years, the rapidly growing and largely unregulated presence of PRC national-owned casinos, entertainment establishments, and other commercial enterprises in Preah Sihanouk Province led to an increase of local sex trafficking and forced labor among Cambodian women and girls, although Cambodia's 2020 ban on online gambling and the subsequent shuttering of many PRC national-owned casinos and other entertainment establishments has reduced such trafficking. Cambodian men form the largest source of demand for children exploited in sex trafficking; however, men from elsewhere in Asia, Australia, Europe, South Africa, and the United States travel to Cambodia to engage in extraterritorial child sexual exploitation and abuse, increasingly facilitated through social media contact. Thousands of urban children left behind by families migrating abroad for work are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking and forced labor. The prevalence of child sex trafficking and extraterritorial child sexual exploitation and abuse reportedly declined in 2020 because of reduced international travel and pandemic-related quarantine requirements. However, NGOs and law enforcement officials reported the pandemic increased incidents of online child sexual exploitation in 2020, and incidents continued to increase through 2022. In 2022, the Cambodian National Council for Children released a report that found 11 percent of Internet-using children in Cambodia between the ages of 12 and 17 had experienced abuse and OCSE. Vietnamese women and children, many of whom are victims of debt-based coercion, travel to Cambodia and are exploited in sex trafficking. NGOs report criminal gangs transport some Vietnamese victims through Cambodia before they are exploited in Thailand and Malaysia. Traffickers in Cambodia are most commonly family or community members or small networks of independent brokers. Some Cambodian orphanages purchase local children from economically disadvantaged families and subject them to malnutrition and unclean living conditions in their facilities for the purpose of attracting and profiting from charitable donations; some of these children are at further risk of sex trafficking and domestic servitude as a result of poor government oversight of adoption processes.