

2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Turkmenistan

TURKMENISTAN (Tier 2 Watch List)

The Government of Turkmenistan does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government made key achievements during the reporting period, so Turkmenistan was upgraded to Tier 2 Watch List. While the government continued policies that perpetuated the mobilization of adults and children for forced labor in the 2024 cotton harvest, it amended Article 8 of the Labor Code to eliminate provisions that increased vulnerabilities to forced labor, added cotton picking and cotton growing to the list of hazardous work for children, and signed and implemented a new roadmap of cooperation with the International Labor Organization (ILO). Additionally, the government investigated, prosecuted, and convicted traffickers and identified trafficking victims for the first time in several years. It also established by presidential decree its Interdepartmental Commission on Combating Human Trafficking (the Commission) and adopted a new anti-trafficking NAP. Despite these achievements, the government did not hold any officials accountable for complicity in forced labor crimes, nor did it fund or provide any victim assistance. The government did not have SOPs for victim identification and referral, hindering overall protection efforts.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Continue substantive actions to end government policies or actions that compel or create pressure for the mobilization of forced labor, to include eliminating the cotton quota and ensuring local officials do not impose fees for replacement pickers and for businesses and entrepreneurs to support the harvest.
- Undertake efforts to implement amendments to Article 8 of the Labor Code by training government officials on the changes.
- Ensure citizens are aware of their “right to refuse” participation in the cotton harvest or other work outside their professional duties, and of the requirement to pay for replacement workers, without suffering consequences.
- Vigorously investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes under Article 128 of the criminal code, and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, including complicit officials and those involved in the mobilization of forced labor, which should involve significant prison terms.
- Adopt and implement formal SOPs for victim identification and referral to care, and train stakeholders on their use.
- Increase the availability of protection services for trafficking victims, including by partnering with civil society service providers.
- Continue to grant independent observers full access to freely and independently observe cotton cultivation and deliver an unfiltered report of the annual cotton harvest.
- Ensure victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked.
- Implement the 2025-2029 NAP and allocate resources for its implementation.
- Establish, train relevant personnel on, and implement labor inspection and recruitment oversight protocols to improve forced labor identification and prevention, including during the recruitment of workers by farmers during agricultural harvests.
- Train police to detect and investigate sex and labor trafficking crimes under Article 128 of the criminal code.

PROSECUTION

The government increased anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts.

Article 128 of the criminal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of four to 10 years' imprisonment for offenses involving adult victims and eight to 15 years' imprisonment for offenses involving child victims; these penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape.

The government reported initiating three investigations of sex trafficking crimes involving five suspects, compared with zero investigations since 2021. The government prosecuted all five suspects and convicted three traffickers under Article 128 of the Criminal Code, compared with no prosecutions since 2019 or convictions since 2018. Courts sentenced two traffickers to 12 years of imprisonment and one trafficker to 11 years. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes; however, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns, inhibiting law enforcement action.

Observers noted trafficking crimes were frequently not reported due to distrust of law enforcement officials and social stigma. In addition, observers reported challenges with the capacity and understanding of trafficking among law enforcement and judicial officials that hindered investigations and led to the misclassification of trafficking crimes. In November 2024, the government amended Article 8 of the Labor Code, which separately defined "forced or obligatory labor"; the amendments removed exceptions to the definition that observers previously noted could be interpreted to increase vulnerabilities to forced labor in the mobilization of citizens for agricultural and public works projects at the local level. Despite this, the government continued to direct and implement policies during the reporting period that perpetuated the mobilization of adults and children for forced labor in the harvest of cotton.

Government officials minimized the prevalence of internal trafficking, citing the lack of formal complaints or appeals from citizens regarding forced labor. The government did not report any cooperation on international trafficking investigations despite officials' acknowledgement of cases involving Turkmen victims abroad. The government reported it administratively penalized 2,269 Labor Code violations, compared with 2,090 in 2022, but did not provide information on how many cases potentially included trafficking crimes. The government, in collaboration with international organizations and NGOs, trained law enforcement and immigration officials, judges, and prosecutors on prosecution and victim identification.

PROTECTION

The government made mixed protection efforts.

For the first time since 2019, government authorities reported identifying 13 trafficking victims and referred all victims to care. Civil society organizations reported identifying and assisting 41 victims of forced labor, including 19 male and 22 female victims. The government did not have SOPs for victim identification and referral to care. The government, in partnership with an international organization, developed SOPs that were pending government review at the end of the reporting period; however, the government previously reported developing SOPs in collaboration with an international organization that were never adopted. The trafficking law required the government to certify trafficking victims' official status; however, the government required victims to directly apply for such status, further hindering identification efforts.

The anti-trafficking law required the government to provide a wide range of services to trafficking victims, including shelter, food, medical care, and financial support. The government again did not report providing services to any trafficking victims, nor did it fund such services. Civil society

noted the government lacked capacity to assist trafficking victims abroad and was reluctant to assist potential returning victims. An NGO operated one foreign donor-funded shelter that could accommodate men and women victims of crime, including trafficking, as well as their children, and provided psychological and medical services, reintegration support, and legal assistance to some victims; however, the shelter closed at the end of the reporting period due to lack of funding. Observers noted there were no shelters available to assist solely child victims of crime, including trafficking.

By law, victims – including those participating in criminal proceedings – were exempt from administrative or criminal liability for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. The legal code guaranteed victims the option to seek employment; required law enforcement agencies to respect their confidentiality; and provided free legal assistance to those applying for official victim status, as well as the option to request temporary residency in Turkmenistan for the duration of relevant criminal proceedings. Due to a lack of formal identification procedures, the government did not take effective measures to prevent the inappropriate penalization of potential victims solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked.

PREVENTION

The government slightly increased prevention efforts.

The government formally established the Commission by presidential decree in May, expanding the total number of ministries to 13, elevating membership of the Commission to the deputy ministerial level, and more clearly delineating the roles of each ministry. The Prosecutor General's Office continued to lead the Commission, which met twice during the reporting period. The government adopted the National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking for 2025-2029. The government supported anti-trafficking awareness campaigns in cooperation with the ILO throughout several provinces. The government operated a general hotline to report all crimes, including human trafficking; however, it did not report identifying any trafficking victims or initiating any investigations as a result of calls to the hotline.

The government signed a new roadmap of cooperation with the ILO for 2024-2025, outlining plans to grant access to an increased number of ILO observers to independently monitor the 2024 cotton harvests and raise awareness on child labor and forced labor throughout the country, among other action items. As part of its implementation of the roadmap activities, the government added cotton picking and cotton growing to the hazardous labor list for children. Additionally, the government permitted an increase in the number of ILO harvest observation groups from seven in 2023 to 15 in 2024 and supported the first public reporting on the ILO's monitoring.

The ILO observation mission found evidence of forced labor and child labor in the 2024 cotton harvest, as well as a continuation of the pick-or-pay system wherein civil servants pay replacement pickers to pick cotton in their place. Specifically, 23 percent of farms surveyed showed evidence of child labor; 20 percent of farmers confirmed civil servants worked on their farms during the harvest; and 31 percent of civil servants working in the cotton harvest indicated they would have faced at least one negative consequence, including wage or job loss, if they did not pick cotton or pay a replacement picker fee. Observers additionally noted some government officials threatened farmers, who leased land from the government and were obligated to utilize it for cotton, with penalties, including loss of land, if they did not meet production quotas. Despite the 2005 ban on using children to pick cotton, the ILO Application of International Labor Standards 2025 Report of the Committee of Experts noted the continued mobilization of children younger than the age of 15 in the 2024 cotton harvest. According to observers, mobilized citizens also harvested wheat, silk cocoons, and other agricultural crops.

The government did not report efforts to hold accountable labor recruiters or brokers involved in the fraudulent recruitment of workers. The government did not provide training for labor inspectors on identifying trafficking crimes. The government continued to restrict international and domestic

travel of Turkmen nationals; these restrictions further incentivized migration through unregulated channels commonly associated with trafficking vulnerabilities. The government did not provide anti-trafficking training to its diplomatic personnel. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. The government granted citizenship to Turkmenistan's small stateless population, reducing trafficking vulnerabilities.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

Trafficking affects all communities. This section summarizes government and civil society reporting on the nature and scope of trafficking over the past five years. Human traffickers exploit domestic victims both in Turkmenistan and abroad. State policies continue to perpetuate government-compelled forced labor; in 2020, 2022, 2023, and 2024, the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations noted the continued practice of forced labor in the cotton sector, and the UN Human Rights Committee expressed its concerns regarding the widespread use of forced labor in the cotton harvest during the fourth periodic report of Turkmenistan in 2024. International observers continue to report that in order to meet central government-imposed production quotas for the cotton harvest, some local government officials force thousands of teachers, medical professionals, utility workers, soldiers, and other state employees; citizens with alimony debts; and vulnerable populations, including migrant workers, some women in commercial sex, and individuals with registered substance abuse disorders to participate in the cotton harvest without payment or pay for a replacement picker or a bribe, using coerced statements of voluntary participation and, under the threat of such penalties as dismissal, reduced work hours, or salary deductions. Authorities reported the ongoing mechanization process has caused manually harvested cotton to significantly decrease. However, as handpicked cotton generally attracts higher prices and farmers preferred manual labor due to high maintenance of the tractors, pressure for handpicking potentially remained. Soldiers are reportedly also subjected to forced labor in private households. Some local authorities reportedly threaten farmers with land expropriation if they attempt to register complaints about payment discrepancies or if they do not meet government-imposed quotas. The government reported farmers were responsible for recruiting cotton pickers for the plot of land provided to them by the government; however, the government did not report any oversight procedures of recruitment processes or how government quotas for cotton production would not compel the mobilization of forced labor. Absent government measures to prevent, monitor, or address supply chain contamination, some goods containing cotton harvested through the use of forced labor potentially entered international supply chains. Media sources report the government compulsorily mobilizes students, soldiers, teachers, doctors, and other state employees for the harvest of other agricultural crops and public works, such as the planting of trees, cleaning public spaces, and in unpaid support roles during government-sponsored parades and holiday celebrations. Citizens unable to participate in the harvest are allegedly required to hire a replacement worker – or pay a bribe – and threatened with loss of wages or employment. International observers corroborated reports that the government continued to mobilize thousands of civil servants and employees from private firms to pick cotton during the annual 2024 harvest. Police reportedly conduct sweeps to remove individuals who are homeless and subsequently place them in agricultural work or domestic servitude at the residences of law enforcement-connected families. Media reports noted some families living in poverty often compel children to serve as porters in local marketplaces and work in agriculture, including some children as young as eight years of age who were paid to work as replacement pickers during the cotton harvest. An NGO reported some children are forced to work in cotton and potato fields during summer educational camps and throughout the cotton harvest as replacement pickers to support their families. Some individuals are vulnerable to police abuse, extortion, and coercion on the basis of their sexual orientation or identity, compounding their vulnerability to family-brokered forced marriages that may result in corollary sex trafficking or forced labor indicators. Residents of rural areas in Turkmenistan are at the highest risk of becoming trafficking victims, especially in the construction and domestic service sectors in Ashgabat.

Turkmen men and women are exploited in forced labor abroad in the textile, agricultural, construction, and domestic service sectors; Turkmen migrant men are also subjected to forced

criminality in drug trafficking. Sex traffickers use online platforms and messaging applications to recruit Turkmen women for exploitation abroad. Traffickers advertise fake job offers and marriage proposals on social media to recruit victims and take their travel documentation on arrival. Türkiye, Russia, Poland, Kazakhstan, and India are the most frequent destinations of Turkmen victims, followed by other countries in the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Europe. Some Turkmen with Russian citizenship are returning to Turkmenistan from Russia to avoid conscription into military service and are vulnerable to trafficking. Enduring government restrictions on freedom of movement – preventing citizens from leaving the country, particularly those deported back to Turkmenistan, as well as restrictions on obtaining a passport overseas – incentivize some citizens to pursue illegal immigration routes rife with trafficking vulnerabilities. Government measures limiting certain foreign financial transactions, coupled with travel and entry restrictions, increase vulnerabilities among Turkmen citizens abroad.