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2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Lebanon

LEBANON (Tier 2 Watch List)

The Government of Lebanon does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts included modestly increasing investigations and continuing to allow an NGO to screen for trafficking among detained migrants in the government detention center. However, the government did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on its anti-trafficking capacity. Lebanon had a caretaker government during the reporting period and faced a strike in the judicial sector along with widespread work stoppages throughout the civil service, which limited the government's ability to establish effective anti-trafficking policies and impacted anti-trafficking efforts. Compared to the scale of the problem in Lebanon, the government's efforts to identify and protect trafficking victims remained woefully inadequate. The government entirely relied on NGOs and civil society to provide shelter and services to trafficking victims and did not report providing financial or in-kind support to those organizations. The parliament did not approve a labor law amendment, pending since 2009, that would extend legal protections to all foreign workers, nor did it approve a draft standardized contract for migrant workers for the third consecutive year. The government did not implement formal victim identification and referral procedures, which resulted in potential unidentified victims facing arrest, detention, or deportation for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Lebanon's visa sponsorship system continued to create vulnerabilities for the exploitation of migrant workers and remained a significant impediment to authorities identifying and protecting trafficking victims; the government did not take any steps to reform the visa sponsorship system despite the extreme vulnerabilities to trafficking inherent in the system. Although it is a prevalent form of trafficking in Lebanon, the government has rarely convicted traffickers for exploiting workers in domestic servitude. The government resumed policies previously suspended during the pandemic, such as requiring notarized employer approval for migrant workers to change employers, which increased migrant workers' vulnerability to trafficking. Therefore Lebanon was downgraded to Tier 2 Watch List.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Finalize and implement government-approved procedures for officials to identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, such as undocumented or detained migrants, women holding artiste visas, domestic workers, and Syrian refugees, for referral to protection services.
- Increase efforts to ensure trafficking victims are not inappropriately arrested, detained, or deported solely for unlawful acts they committed as a direct result of being trafficked, such as immigration or "prostitution" violations.
- Enact the labor law amendment extending legal protections to all foreign workers, including domestic workers and artiste visa holders, and approve the draft standardized contract for migrant workers as initially submitted to the State Shura Council in 2020.
- Strengthen and expand efforts to reform the visa sponsorship system to ensure all foreign workers, including domestic workers, are not bound to abusive employers, and allow workers full freedom of movement, including by permanently waiving previous employer approval requirements for workers to change employers.
- Increase investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of perpetrators of all forms of trafficking, including domestic servitude, and investigate for potential trafficking crimes employers and recruitment agents who withhold workers' passports, travel documents, or wages.

- Ensure provisions are available to victims for legal alternatives to their removal to countries in which they would face retribution and hardship.
- Increase efforts to train judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officials, and diplomatic personnel on trafficking and application of the anti-trafficking law.
- Screen all domestic workers in detention centers for trafficking indicators and refer victims to care.
- Switch *artiste* visa holders, a visa program that contributes to the vulnerability of women to and may facilitate sex trafficking, to temporary work visas that ensure full labor protections and freedom of movement under Lebanese law.
- Ensure the judiciary coordinates with the Directorate of General Security (DGS) to consistently apply the anti-trafficking law by granting temporary residency permits for trafficking victims and allowing victims to work.
- Continue to work in partnership with NGOs to screen for, identify, and provide protection services – including witness support during criminal proceedings – for all victims.
- Increase efforts to raise public awareness of trafficking, including exploitation of migrant domestic workers.
- Formally establish the victim assistance fund.
- Adopt and implement the NAP.
- Improve the judiciary's capacity to collect, compile, and track data and outcomes of trafficking cases from all courts.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained inadequate law enforcement efforts. The 2011 anti-trafficking law criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of five to seven years' imprisonment and fines if the offense involved an adult victim, and 10 to 12 years' imprisonment and fines for those involving a child victim. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape.

Ongoing financial, economic, and political crises continued to affect law enforcement's ability to investigate trafficking cases and compile data. Due to the ongoing economic and financial crisis, the Ministry of Interior (MOI), the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), and other law enforcement agencies reduced their workforce to only report to work one or two days per week, limiting the government's ability to respond to information requests. Most law enforcement and judiciary offices did not have basic supplies including electricity or fuel for vehicles or generators. In addition, judicial assistants and court clerks went on strike in July 2022 protesting extremely low wages as a result of the devaluation of the Lebanese Pound, as well as extreme under-resourcing of the judicial system; judges and prosecutors joined the strike in August 2022. As a result, the judicial sector did not function for six months of the reporting period until the judges, judicial assistants, and court clerks agreed to suspend the strike in January 2023; a work slowdown remained in effect the rest of the reporting period. Due to the judiciary strike, law enforcement reported they frequently were unable to get a judge's approval before conducting law enforcement actions such as raids which further impeded efforts to investigate trafficking cases.

In 2022, the Internal Security Forces (ISF) investigated 43 potential sex trafficking cases. Additionally, DGS investigated 125 cases of suspected trafficking involving migrant domestic workers and adult nightclub workers holding *artiste* visas. DGS reported it determined seven of the 125 cases met the criteria for trafficking cases; three cases involved labor trafficking indicators and four cases involved sex trafficking indicators. The 168 total investigations in 2022 was a slight increase compared to the 123 investigations initiated in 2021. MOJ did not have a centralized data collection system to report standardized data on prosecutions and convictions. In 2022, the government initiated prosecutions of 10 alleged sex traffickers, a decrease compared with initiating 20 sex trafficking prosecutions in 2021. Courts convicted one sex trafficker and sentenced the trafficker to four years' imprisonment and a fine; the government convicted one trafficker in 2021.

The government did not report the sentence of the convicted trafficker. Despite domestic servitude being a prevalent form of trafficking in Lebanon, the government has never reported convicting a trafficker for such exploitation under the 2011 anti-trafficking law and has not prosecuted a domestic servitude case since 2015. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government officials complicit in human trafficking crimes.

The ISF anti-trafficking unit remained understaffed and underfunded with only 22 officers and no field offices outside of Beirut, which limited the unit's work; although organizationally separate, the anti-trafficking unit's commander and officers also comprised the ISF's moral protection unit, functionally merging the duties of the two units and further limiting the ISF's ability to investigate trafficking cases. An international organization reported investigators sometimes failed to provide sufficient details when referring cases to prosecutors, resulting in trafficking cases being reclassified as other, sometimes lesser crimes in the judicial system. Additionally, government officials and NGOs continued to report some judges lacked understanding of the anti-trafficking law and knowledge of best practices for handling trafficking cases. Officials generally sought to resolve trafficking cases involving foreign workers through mediation between the employer and worker rather than referring them for criminal prosecution. Government officials continued to report security forces were reluctant to arrest parents for subjecting their children to trafficking, usually in forced begging, due to a lack of social services available should the child be removed from the family. The government did not report providing anti-trafficking training to officials but relied on trainings provided by NGOs and international organizations; however, some NGOs reported being unable to provide training during 2022 due to lack of funding.

PROTECTION

The government decreased already weak victim identification and protection efforts and remained dependent on NGOs to provide most victim services. For the ninth consecutive year, the government did not formally adopt procedures drafted in 2014 for the identification and referral of victims to NGO services. In practice, officials continued to identify and refer trafficking victims to care on an ad hoc basis. For example, DGS used an SOP for identifying and referring trafficking victims during investigations of commercial sex cases and managing cases in the DGS detention center. During the previous reporting period, the government coordinated with an international organization to draft new SOPs for victim identification, but the government did not finalize or implement the SOPs for the second consecutive year. The Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) continued to work with an international organization to develop a digital tool to better identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, including migrant workers; MOSA adopted the tool, but it had not digitized nor fully operationalized the tool for the second consecutive year. Law enforcement reported the seven-month judiciary strike impeded their efforts to proactively identify and remove victims from trafficking situations because they were frequently unable to get a judge's approval before conducting law enforcement actions. In 2022, the government identified 148 potential trafficking victims, nine of whom judges officially recognized as trafficking victims following investigation. This was an increase compared with its identification of at least 70 victims in 2021. However, the government reported referring only 23 of the potential victims to NGO services, compared with all 70 identified victims in 2021, and did not report whether the remaining 125 potential victims were referred to services. An NGO reported identifying 23 sex trafficking victims and NGOs and international organizations reported providing shelter and/or services to 153 sex trafficking victims and 544 labor trafficking victims in 2022.

The government did not directly provide protection services to trafficking victims, nor funding for services for adult victims, but it continued to work in partnership with NGOs. NGO-run victim care facilities in Lebanon were dedicated only to female and child trafficking victims; there were no services available or government resources dedicated to male trafficking victims, even though forced labor of men in construction reportedly continued. As in previous reporting periods, an NGO reported referring foreign national male victims to their embassy or consulate for accommodation. The government continued implementing a longstanding MOU with an NGO whereby DGS referred female victims to an NGO-run safe house and provided security for the

location; the government did not allow victims to work while receiving assistance at the safe house. However, the NGO reported it could not accommodate child sex trafficking victims due to a lack of funding for specialized psycho-social assistance. Victim services were not time-limited or conditional upon victims' cooperation with law enforcement. MOSA also continued to coordinate and fund the provision of protection services to child trafficking victims through contractual agreements with NGOs. Foreign embassies that provided shelter to nationals when NGO shelters were full reported providing accommodation to an increased number of their nationals, including domestic servitude victims, due to the economic crisis. For the fourth consecutive year, MOSA coordinated with an international organization to provide technical support for the development of an implementation decree to create a victim assistance fund; the decree remained in draft form at the end of the reporting period.

The government continued to arrest, detain, and deport unidentified victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, such as domestic workers who fled abusive employers, out-of-status or undocumented migrant workers, women holding *artiste* visas, and persons in commercial sex. In addition, an international organization reported 65 percent of children in detention in Lebanon were Syrian and likely included trafficking victims detained for crimes they were forced to commit as a direct result of being trafficked, such as theft and begging. NGOs reported some foreign victims, including migrant domestic workers, sometimes refused to file complaints or retracted testimony due to fear of reprisal or deportation. Under the visa sponsorship system, foreign workers – including foreign trafficking victims who left their place of employment without permission from their employer – forfeited their legal status, thereby increasing the risk of arrest, detention, and deportation. DGS continued using administrative procedures adopted in February 2021 for employers to inform DGS about domestic workers who left the workplace; these procedures replaced previously used employer complaint systems that automatically launched prosecutions of migrant workers who left their workplace. In addition, the procedures prohibited the use of certain language in official reports, including that which implied domestic workers violated employment conditions like “fled” or “ran away,” replacing them with the phrasing “left the workplace.” Authorities could subject foreign workers without valid residence and work permits to detention for one to two months – or longer in some instances – followed by deportation; authorities resumed implementation of this policy during the reporting period after suspending it during the pandemic. Authorities could immediately deport women holding *artiste* visas upon arrest for “prostitution” violations; DGS reported it did not deport any *artiste* visa holders in 2022 but two *artiste* visa holders were voluntarily repatriated following “prostitution” investigations.

DGS continued to operate a 750-person detention center where authorities detained foreign domestic workers for violating the terms of their work contracts or visas. As in past years, DGS allowed an NGO to operate a permanent office inside the detention center with unhindered access to detainees to provide legal and psycho-social services. However, due to a decrease in funding for the NGO over the past four reporting periods, the NGO was unable to continue providing health services to detainees – including trafficking victims – and was only able to provide social and legal services. DGS also continued to permit the NGO to interview detainees to identify trafficking victims among the detention center population; the NGO did not identify any trafficking victims in the detention center during the reporting period, compared with 130 victims the NGO identified in 2021.

Victims could file civil suits to obtain compensation, however, the government did not report whether courts awarded compensation to victims through civil suits during the reporting period. Investigative judges could exclude the identity of a victim from official reports if there was a concern that providing information about the crime could result in a threat to the life or safety of the victim or their family. In addition, victims could provide testimony via video or written statement. The government did not report whether any of these safeguards were invoked or provided during the reporting period. Judges could allow foreign victims to reside in Lebanon during the investigation, but the government did not report if any judges issued such a decision. NGOs continued to report foreign victims preferred quick administrative settlements followed by repatriation rather than long criminal prosecutions because of the lack of protection services or resettlement options during criminal proceedings. Therefore, authorities faced challenges pursuing

potential trafficking cases when victims chose voluntary repatriation as they were not present in the country to testify against their traffickers and law enforcement did not often pursue other forms of evidence. The government did not provide temporary or permanent residency status or other relief from deportation for foreign trafficking victims who faced retribution or hardship in the countries to which they would be deported. During the reporting period, Lebanese authorities continued to deport or otherwise create coercive environments that pushed Syrian refugees to return to Syria without assessing protection needs; the Government of Syria had a government policy or pattern of human trafficking exploiting its nationals in forced labor in compulsory military service by forcing them to serve for indefinite or otherwise arbitrary periods and recruiting or using child soldiers.

PREVENTION

The government decreased already insufficient efforts to prevent trafficking and the government's visa sponsorship system actively increased migrant workers' vulnerability to trafficking. The national anti-trafficking steering committee under the National Human Rights Committee was responsible for coordinating anti-trafficking efforts but observers noted the government relied on civil society to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts and convene government agencies combating trafficking. For the tenth consecutive year, the government did not formally adopt and resource its 2013 NAP, but relevant ministries continued to implement portions of the draft plan. The government did not report conducting any public awareness campaigns during the reporting period aside from a training for an NGO and relied on civil society organizations to conduct awareness raising activities. DGS and Ministry of Labor (MOL) continued to operate hotlines to receive reports of abuse and migrant worker complaints, including suspected trafficking crimes; the government did not report how many trafficking-related calls the hotlines received or whether calls resulted in investigations or identified victims. DGS continued a program to inform *artiste* visa holders about restrictions and obligations of their visa status upon arrival to Beirut Rafik Hariri International Airport. Under the program, if the visa holder objected to the visa's terms, they were free to return to their home country at the expense of the visa holder's sponsor. However, NGOs reported the conditions of the *artiste* visa were inherently exploitative and may have facilitated sex trafficking; despite commercial sex being illegal in Lebanon, *artiste* visa holders' sponsors frequently coerced them to perform commercial sex acts to pay their debts – a practice equivalent to sex trafficking. Additionally, DGS regulations for the visa program required regular screening for sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy tests, implying an expectation *artiste* visa holders engage in sexual activity despite extreme restrictions on their movement. Under a directive from DGS, airport officers continued to return passports directly to foreign domestic workers upon their arrival in Lebanon, but NGOs reported that many employers confiscated workers' passports in private. The government did not have a law that prohibited or penalized confiscation of workers' passports or travel documents by employers or labor agents.

Lebanon's labor law excluded both Lebanese and foreign national domestic workers, denying them protections such as a minimum wage, limits on working hours, and other labor protections. Lebanon's visa sponsorship system continued to prevent foreign workers from switching employers (without notarized employer approval) or receiving adequate access to legal recourse in response to abuse. Migrant workers, including potential trafficking victims, who left their place of employment prior to fulfilling their work contract, were considered out of status and subjected to fines and detention for their irregular presence in the country; loss of legal status created greater vulnerabilities to trafficking. In September 2020, the caretaker Minister of Labor attempted to introduce an amendment to the draft labor law extending legal protections to foreign workers, including domestic workers; however, the State Shura Council (the sole court for adjudicating claims against the government) determined a minister in caretaker status could not submit an amendment to a law and the draft labor law remained pending at the end of the reporting period. The standardized work contract for migrant domestic workers, drafted by a now-defunct joint government and international organization working group to reform the visa sponsorship system and approved by the caretaker Minister of Labor in 2020, remained suspended at the end of the reporting period. For two years during the pandemic, DGS had waived requirements for notarized employer approval for workers to change employers and waived most overstay fines for migrant

workers; an international organization reported these temporary measures ended during the reporting period and the government had reverted to pre-pandemic policies. A 2015 ministerial decree prohibited recruitment agencies from requesting or receiving any worker-paid recruitment fees, but the government acknowledged numerous unregistered recruitment agencies operated illegally and may have charged migrant workers recruitment fees. MOL reported investigating, suspending, closing, or taking enforcement actions against any recruitment agencies for labor violations or complaints of mistreating migrant domestic workers during the reporting period but did not report any details. MOL also maintained a list of an unknown number of recruitment agencies that had committed fraudulent recruitment practices; however, owners of blacklisted recruitment agencies reportedly opened new agencies registered under the names of new partners. The government did not report prosecuting any recruitment or employment agencies for potential trafficking crimes during the reporting period. The government did not take steps to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts or address child sex tourism by Lebanese nationals abroad. The government did not provide anti-trafficking training for its diplomatic personnel.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Lebanon, and traffickers exploit victims from Lebanon abroad. Women and girls from South and Southeast Asia and an increasing number from East and West Africa are subjected to domestic servitude in Lebanon. According to an international organization, more than 100,000 migrant domestic workers were in Lebanon in 2021. Despite the ongoing economic crisis, NGOs reported recruitment agencies continued to aggressively recruit foreign national domestic workers, particularly from Nigeria and the Philippines. However, an NGO estimated approximately 50,000 migrant workers left Lebanon between the onset of the pandemic and the end of 2022. Lebanese government officials and NGOs reported most employers withhold their domestic workers' passports, and some employers also withhold workers' wages, force them to work excessive hours without rest days, restrict their freedom of movement, and physically or sexually abuse them. NGOs report such abuse of domestic workers is typically underreported. Employers subsequently exploit or abuse many migrant workers who arrive in Lebanon through legal employment agencies, and some employment agencies recruit workers through fraudulent or false job offers. The government issued 34,198 visas for migrant workers in 2022 compared with 23,036 visas for migrant workers in 2021, 9,409 in 2020, and 33,075 in 2019. NGOs reported employers continued dropping domestic workers off at their embassies and at an international organization because they were unable to continue paying salaries. The number of exploitation cases perpetrated by foreign nationals against their own countrymen continued to increase, particularly among migrant workers. Traffickers of the same nationality as the migrant worker coerce those who have been fired or abandoned by their Lebanese employer into domestic servitude or sex trafficking. NGOs report demand for domestic workers already in Lebanon continued during the reporting period due to the economic crisis. NGOs reported the combined impact of the economic and financial crises and pandemic restrictions increased the vulnerability of Lebanese nationals to trafficking. NGOs and international organizations reported an increase in the exploitation of Lebanese adults by Lebanese nationals – particularly in industries such as custodial services – and similar to migrant workers previously filling the same jobs; these Lebanese workers were subjected to abuses, such as nonpayment of wages, poor working conditions, and excessive hours.

Women, primarily from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Morocco, and Tunisia, legally enter Lebanon to work as dancers in nightclubs through Lebanon's *artiste* visa program. An *artiste* visa is valid for three months and can be renewed once. The terms of the *artiste* visa prohibit foreign women working in these nightclubs to leave the hotel where they reside, except to work in the nightclubs that sponsor them, and the nightclub owners withhold the women's passports and wages and control their movement. Traffickers also exploit these women through physical and sexual abuse and domestic servitude. The government and NGOs reported the number of migrant domestic workers and *artiste* visa holders entering Lebanon decreased during the pandemic; the government reported 409 *artiste* visa holders entered Lebanon in 2022, compared with none in 2021, 774 in 2020, and 3,376 in 2019. The government reported approximately 38 out of 42 adult

nightclubs closed permanently due to the economic crisis and pandemic-related shutdowns, after which *artiste* visa holders either returned to their home countries or stayed in Lebanon if they found work at a different nightclub.

Adults and children among the estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon are at high risk of sex and labor trafficking. Restrictions on Syrians' ability to work legally in Lebanon and the enforcement of residency permit laws increase this population's vulnerability to trafficking. Syrians are commonly involved in the exploitation of other Syrians in Lebanon, particularly targeting refugees fleeing the conflict. For example, Syrian traffickers hold Syrian refugee adults and children in bonded labor to pay for food, shelter, and transit to or from Lebanon, and they contract out groups of refugees to work in the agricultural sector in the Beka'a Valley. Similarly, an international organization reported evidence of bonded labor within refugee communities, where child labor is used in exchange for living in informal tented settlements. Child labor and forced child labor among the Syrian refugee population continued to increase, particularly in agriculture, construction, and street vending and begging. These children are at high risk for labor trafficking, especially on the streets of main urban areas such as Beirut and Tripoli, as well as in the agricultural sectors of Beka'a and Akkar. In 2019, international organizations reported the presence of children working in illegal cannabis farms in the Beka'a. NGOs reported that some Syrian refugee children are forced or coerced to conduct criminal activity. Syrian refugee LGBTQI+ persons, women, girls, and some men are highly vulnerable to sex trafficking. Many women and girls recruited from Syria with false promises of work were subjected to commercial sexual exploitation in which they experienced mental, physical, and sexual abuse and forced abortions. Family members or powerful local families forced some Syrian refugee women and girls into commercial sex acts or early marriage to ease economic hardships; these women and girls are highly vulnerable to trafficking. Lebanese nationals fleeing the economic crisis reportedly joined Syrian refugees to migrate irregularly from north Lebanon to Cyprus, Italy, and Türkiye, and an international organization reported organized trafficking networks fraudulently offered Lebanese nationals false or misleading job opportunities. Syrians and Lebanese nationals traveling through these channels are vulnerable to sex trafficking in Türkiye. NGOs and international organizations reported non-state armed groups, including Hizballah, Fatah al-Islam, Jund Ansar Allah, Saraya al-Muqawama, and ISIS, recruited or used child soldiers in 2021 and 2022; refugee children, particularly children residing in Palestinian refugee camps, were especially vulnerable to recruitment or use as child soldiers.