

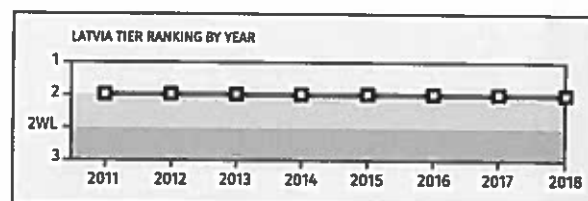
and forced labor in neighboring countries, particularly Thailand. Chinese women and girls are also subjected to sex trafficking within Laos. Some of the Vietnamese men and women working in or near (often illegal) logging and construction areas along the Laos-Vietnam border may be trafficking victims. Burmese nationals work as manual laborers or are involved in prostitution near the Lao portion of the "Golden Triangle"—the geographic area marked by the intersection of the Lao, Burmese, and Thai borders.

Some of the 20,000 registered migrant workers in Lao Special or Specific Economic Zones, along with a high number of undocumented workers in these areas, are reportedly vulnerable to trafficking or other labor abuses. An increasing number of Chinese- and Vietnamese-owned companies reportedly facilitate the unregistered entry of labor migrants from their respective countries into Laos—including with possible assistance from corrupt Lao immigration officials—and subject them to forced labor in mines, hydropower plants, and agricultural plantations. Some Lao adults are subjected to forced labor in these sectors within Laos; children in particular are subjected to forced labor in agriculture—often by their families. Other Lao communities may be vulnerable to forced labor in the ongoing construction of a major railway connecting China and Laos, along with a high number of Chinese migrant workers brought to Laos for the project. Some Vietnamese, Chinese, and Lao women and children are subjected to sex trafficking in larger cities and in close proximity to national borders, casinos, and special economic zones—especially those with heavy Chinese investment—reportedly to meet the demand of Asian tourists and migrant workers. NGOs estimate 13,000 individuals are in prostitution in Lao commercial establishments, with as many as three times that figure operating independently throughout the country. International organizations note insufficient or informal birth registration procedures leave as much as 30 percent of the Lao population without identity documentation, significantly increasing their vulnerability to exploitation. Communities resettled due to the construction of dams and other large infrastructure projects may be especially vulnerable to trafficking. Reports indicate child sex tourists from the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States have traveled to Laos for the purpose of exploiting child sex trafficking victims.

LATVIA: TIER 2

The Government of Latvia does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period; therefore Latvia remained on Tier 2. The government demonstrated increasing efforts by certifying more victims for the state-funded assistance program, amending labor regulations requiring licensed placement agencies to ensure at least minimum wage for workers hired for employment outside Latvia, and amending the code on administrative violations to protect victims forced to commit crimes. However, despite these efforts, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. Authorities prosecuted fewer traffickers under the trafficking statute, and courts continued to issue convicted traffickers lenient sentences, usually resulting in no jail time. Officials' lack of knowledge of trafficking indicators impaired proactive victim identification, particularly among women and children exploited in commercial sex. Additionally,

children in state orphanages were vulnerable to sex trafficking and ineligible for state-funded trafficking victim assistance program benefits.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LATVIA

Vigorously investigate and prosecute trafficking cases under the trafficking statute (section 154-1 of the criminal law) and punish convicted traffickers with stronger sentences; increase efforts to proactively identify trafficking victims, particularly minors in state care institutions induced into commercial sex and victims of sexual exploitation in Latvia's legal prostitution industry; provide specialized trafficking victim services to children in care institutions, such as orphanages; amend regulations to allow for the enrollment of persons from state care institutions into the state-funded victim assistance program; expand efforts to train officials involved in judicial proceedings to understand all forms of trafficking and apply anti-trafficking laws; increase anti-trafficking training for law enforcement officials on working with victims, evidence collection, and understanding psychological coercion; and broaden public awareness efforts to educate socially at-risk groups on the dangers of trafficking.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained law enforcement efforts. Sections 154-1 and 154-2 of Latvia's criminal code criminalized sex and labor trafficking and prescribed a maximum penalty of up to 15 years imprisonment, which was sufficiently stringent and, with regard to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. Judges and prosecutors had the power to reclassify cases from section 154-1 to lesser crimes. Trafficking crimes could be charged under section 164, which criminalized exploiting vulnerability or using deceit to involve individuals in prostitution with prescribed penalties as lenient as community service or a fine. Additionally, law enforcement reportedly were more likely to investigate and charge suspected traffickers for crimes other than trafficking, such as pimping and transfer for sexual exploitation. Authorities used section 165-1, which prohibited the transfer of individuals for the purpose of sexual exploitation, to prevent potential cases of trafficking by charging perpetrators who attempted to recruit individuals for sexual exploitation schemes abroad.

A 19-officer State Police unit specialized in investigating trafficking, sham marriages, and related crimes. Police investigated seven new cases involving four suspects under section 154-1 in 2017, compared with four cases involving three suspects in 2016. Authorities initiated prosecutions of three traffickers under section 154-1, compared with 11 in 2016. Courts convicted four traffickers in 2017, compared with four in 2016. Three of the convicted traffickers received conditional sentences resulting in no prison time, and one trafficker received a fine. Under section 165-1, authorities investigated eight new cases, prosecuted five defendants, and convicted six suspects during the reporting period; none of the convicted offenders received prison sentences. By comparison, in 2016 authorities investigated 10 cases, prosecuted four defendants, and convicted 10 suspects. A case from 2014 involving two Riga police officers

charged with facilitating pimping remained in court at the end of the reporting period. In 2016, the specialized unit reported the first domestic forced labor investigation in at least six years in which 22 Latvian nationals were coerced into working on a local farm and committing criminal acts in exchange for alcohol and debt forgiveness, likely cases of debt bondage. In this case, two suspects were charged with trafficking; the case remained in court at the end of the reporting period. In 2017, police from Latvia and the United Kingdom cooperated on a labor trafficking case involving 12 suspected traffickers—all Latvian nationals who recruited victims in Latvia and exploited them in the United Kingdom. Latvian authorities started the process to extradite four suspects for further prosecution and trial in the United Kingdom.

Perennial issues within the judicial system, such as lengthy trials and lenient sentences, which often resulted in no jail time for convicted traffickers, limited Latvia's prosecution efforts. Observers reported the need for more training for judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement, particularly on applying anti-trafficking laws, working with victims, evidence collection, and understanding psychological coercion. The government supported such training during the reporting period by partnering with an international organization and an NGO to train more than 400 government employees (social workers, law enforcement, and local government staff) on victim identification and referral mechanisms. Additionally, Latvia's judicial center organized a training for prosecutors, judges, and judges' assistants on trafficking involving minors. The police collaborated with international and non-governmental partners to provide training for law enforcement officials, and the State Border Guard trained 25 border guards in victim identification.

PROTECTION

The government increased efforts to protect trafficking victims. The government allowed a second NGO to assist victims in the state-funded, NGO-run victim assistance program for 2017-2018. This program offered victims medical and psychological assistance, legal representation, housing, and reintegration services. In 2017, the government increased funding for the program to €135,110 (\$162,200) from €133,275 (\$155,990) in 2016. Authorities certified victims for enrollment in the program based on decisions by either law enforcement or an NGO-led panel of experts. Authorities and NGOs certified 24 new victims, an increase from 14 victims in 2016. Six enrollees were male; 18 were female, three of whom were minors subjected to sexual exploitation. Government regulations on assistance to trafficking victims limited state-funded rehabilitation services to six months, although victims whose cases went to trial received assistance, mostly legal counselling, for the duration of the legal proceedings. Police, immigration, and social services had written procedures for identifying victims. The government's trafficking working group reported most government agencies lacked either the practical experience or willingness to identify victims. Experts noted agencies tasked primarily with non-trafficking issues, such as the State Border Guard and the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, did not refer trafficking cases for investigation or victims for assistance. Identifying child sex trafficking victims domestically remained a challenge. Regulations did not allow for the enrollment of persons from state care institutions, such as orphanages, in the state trafficking victim assistance program; observers reported five minors in institutions were reported to law enforcement as suspected trafficking victims. Experts raised concerns about sexual exploitation in Latvia's legal prostitution industry, noting law enforcement's focus on fining individuals who were not

in compliance with prostitution regulations or other criminal statutes rather than on identifying potential trafficking victims.

NGOs reported cooperation improved with law enforcement on trafficking investigations. Thirteen registered victims cooperated with law enforcement in 2017, although male victims were often reluctant to work with police because they felt ashamed for having been exploited. Courts had digital video capabilities and audio-recording equipment to protect victims from trafficker-victim confrontation. The criminal law provided special protection measures for trafficking victims, including questioning victims in private rooms by a prosecutor or judge of the same gender as the victim, the right to a closed court hearing, and the right to court-recorded testimony. During the reporting period, the government modified the code on administrative violations to include that administrative liability could also be waived if criminal acts were performed while the individual was subjected to trafficking and forced to commit the crime. In 2017, one trafficking victim received compensation from the state agency for judicial assistance, which administered a crime victims' compensation program. Five trafficking victims received state-funded repatriation and other services through the state assistance program.

PREVENTION

The government increased prevention efforts. The anti-trafficking working group monitored efforts, facilitated inter-ministerial information exchange, and implemented the 2014-2020 national action plan. At the municipal level, the government established two trafficking task forces and trained government employees. The government amended labor regulations to require licensed placement agencies ensure at least minimum wage for workers hired for employment outside Latvia. During the reporting period, the state monitored the activities of licensed employment agencies and canceled licenses for 34 agencies in violation. The labor inspectorate conducted 50 specialized inspections focusing on identifying forced labor; none of these inspections resulted in identified labor trafficking. The labor inspectorate sponsored a Baltic regional conference on topics including labor trafficking. Various ministries contributed to a number of awareness-raising activities, including publishing an illustrated book by trafficking survivors for outreach in schools. The government maintained emergency helplines that received calls on potential trafficking situations. The government did not report any specific measures to reduce the demand for commercial sex.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, Latvia is a source country for men, women, and children subjected to sex and labor trafficking. To a lesser extent, Latvia is a source and destination country for exploitation in forced criminality. Traffickers subject Latvian women and girls to sex trafficking in Latvia and other parts of Europe. Government agencies note an increase in child sex trafficking cases over the past few years. Children in state orphanages are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking. Latvian men and women are subjected to forced labor, mainly in other parts of Europe. The government reports organized crime groups facilitate labor trafficking to Germany and Ukraine. Latvian women recruited for brokered marriages in Western Europe, particularly Ireland, are vulnerable to sex trafficking, domestic servitude, and forced labor.