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2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Lebanon

LEBANON: Tier 2

The Government of Lebanon does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Lebanon remained on Tier 2. These efforts included temporarily waiving requirements for employer approval to allow migrant workers to change employers, extending migrant workers’ residencies through June 2021 in response to the pandemic, amending reporting processes to prevent automatic penalization of migrant workers leaving abusive employers, and increasing investigations. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government did not initiate any new prosecutions or convict any sex or labor traffickers. The government did not approve the labor law amendment extending legal protections to all foreign workers or approve the draft standardized contract for migrant workers. The government did not implement formal victim identification and referral procedures, which resulted in the potential for some victims to face arrest, detention, or deportation for unlawful acts their traffickers compelled them to commit. Lebanon’s sponsorship system continued to create vulnerabilities for the exploitation of migrant workers and remained a significant impediment to authorities identifying and protecting trafficking victims.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Develop and implement government-approved procedures for officials to identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, such as illegal 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 arrested, detained, or deported for unlawful acts their traffickers compelled them to commit, 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 submitted to the State Shura Council. • Strengthen and expand efforts to reform the sponsorship system to ensure all foreign workers, including domestic workers and *artiste* visa holders, 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 prosecutions and convictions of perpetrators of all forms of trafficking under the anti-trafficking law and investigate for potential trafficking crimes employers and recruitment agents who withhold workers’ passports, travel documents, or wages. • Increase efforts to train judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officials, and diplomatic personnel about the crime of trafficking and application of the anti-trafficking law. • Screen all detained domestic workers in detention centers for trafficking indicators and refer victims to care. • Take concrete steps to improve oversight of *artiste* visas, a program that contributes to the vulnerability of women to sex trafficking. • 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, 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 draft national anti-trafficking action plan. • Improve the judiciary’s capacity to collect, compile, and track data and outcomes of trafficking cases from all courts.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained uneven 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. The government did not have a law that prohibited or penalized confiscation of workers’ passports or travel documents by employers or labor agents.

During the reporting period, the Internal Security Forces (ISF) investigated 12 cases, confirmed by the judiciary as instances of human trafficking, involving 77 suspects—67 men and 10 women—for sex trafficking; the 12 cases involved 38 sex trafficking victims. Additionally, DGS investigated 206 cases of suspected trafficking involving

migrant domestic workers and adult nightclub workers holding *artiste* visas. DGS reported it determined 128 of the 206 cases met the criteria for trafficking cases; some of the cases involved multiple violations. DGS investigations resulted in the following outcomes: referral to judicial or law enforcement authorities for further investigation, payment of back wages to workers, repatriation of migrant workers, and denying or restricting employers and sponsors from hiring migrant workers, including domestic workers. The 218 total investigations in 2020 represented an increase from the 191 investigations initiated during the previous reporting period. The government reported one prosecution continued from a previous reporting period but did not report initiating any new prosecutions or convicting any sex or labor traffickers during the reporting period. This was a decrease in prosecutions and convictions in comparison to the previous reporting period, during which the government prosecuted 46 alleged traffickers and convicted and sentenced 22 traffickers. The government did not report investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government officials complicit in human trafficking offenses during the reporting period.

Due to pandemic mitigation measures, the government assigned all ISF units, including the anti-trafficking unit, to lockdown enforcement for at least a week at a time at multiple points in the reporting period; the units could not complete regular duties while so assigned. In addition, the government either closed courts or significantly reduced their operating capacity due to pandemic-related mitigation measures; all but emergency trials were suspended, and the government prioritized completing investigations that would allow the release of pre-trial detainees to reduce overcrowding in prisons. The government reported pandemic-related lockdowns and mitigation measures hindered investigators' ability to collect evidence and victim testimonies. The ISF anti-trafficking unit remained understaffed and underfunded with only 22 officers covering all of Lebanon and no field offices outside of Beirut; this continued to limit the ISF's work and ability to recruit and train new officers for the unit. 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 ISF, DGS, and Ministry of Justice (MOJ) continued to occasionally include specialized anti-trafficking training as a part of their curriculum for personnel. The government also continued to encourage officials to participate in anti-trafficking trainings provided by NGOs, though the pandemic forced the postponement of many trainings.

PROTECTION

The government increased victim identification and protection efforts, although the government remained dependent on NGOs to provide most victim services. The government did not formally adopt draft procedures 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. In November 2020, the government convened international organizations and NGOs via virtual fora to develop a plan to finalize adoption of the draft victim identification procedures. While the government established steps towards adoption, it did not finalize a timeline due to the caretaker status of the government. During the reporting period, the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) requested an international organization's assistance to develop a digital tool to better identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, including migrant workers. The government identified at least 156 trafficking victims and referred all of them to NGO protection services during the reporting period. The number of victims identified and referred to services in 2020 represented a substantial increase from the 63 victims the government identified in 2019. The government reported a DGS-operated hotline received 211 calls but did not report if it identified any victims through hotline calls or referred any cases for investigation. Through the Ministry of Labor's (MOL) complaints office and 24-hour hotline, it received 300 complaints but did not report further details.

The government did not directly provide protection services to trafficking victims but continued to work in partnership with NGOs to provide essential victim services. Government officials noted the pandemic limited NGOs' ability to assist victims due to movement restrictions and social distancing measures that reduced the number of new victims entering shelters and made service provision difficult. 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 trafficking of men in the construction sector reportedly continued. An NGO reported referring male victims to their embassy or consulate for accommodation during the reporting period. Pursuant to a longstanding memorandum of understanding, renewed during the reporting period, between the government and an NGO, 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. In response to pandemic-related mitigation measures, the NGO updated the safe house to include single-occupant rooms for quarantine purposes. In 2020, the safe house assisted 145 trafficking victims. 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 example, the Philippines embassy regularly housed 140 migrant domestic workers in a space meant for 30. DGS expanded a December 2019 amnesty program through June 2021 to waive most overstay fines and provided plane tickets for an unspecified number of migrant workers, including potential trafficking victims; although the program still required out-of-status migrants to pay one year's worth of fees—between 300,000 lira (\$200) and 400,000 lira (\$270)—DGS waived all fees when NGOs or foreign embassies requested. For the second 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. In September 2020, the caretaker Minister of Labor attempted to introduce an amendment to the draft labor law extending legal protections to foreign and domestic workers; however, the State Shura Council determined a minister in caretaker status could not submit an amendment to a law.

The government continued to arrest, detain, and/or deport unidentified victims for unlawful acts their traffickers compelled them to commit, such as domestic workers who fled abusive employers, out-of-status or irregular migrant workers, women holding *artiste* visas, and persons in commercial sex. 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 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. In February 2021, DGS adopted new administrative procedures for employers to inform DGS about domestic workers that have left the workplace; the new procedures replaced previously used employer complaint systems that automatically launched prosecutions of migrant workers who left their workplace. In addition, DGS prohibited the use of certain language in official reports implying domestic workers violated employment conditions such as “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; due to the pandemic, authorities did not exercise this authority during the reporting period. Furthermore, authorities could immediately deport women holding *artiste* visas upon arrest for prostitution violations; however, DGS reported it did not deport any *artiste* visa holders during the reporting period and voluntarily repatriated 53 *artiste* visa holders, five of which were repatriated following trafficking investigations. During the reporting period, DGS extended all residency permits for all migrant workers until June 2021 to mitigate increased vulnerabilities resulting from the pandemic. 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. For the last several years, DGS allowed an NGO to operate a permanent office inside the detention center that allowed staff unhindered access to detainees to provide medical and psycho-social services. However, due to a decrease in government funding to the NGO over the past two 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, although interviews were limited due to pandemic-related mitigation measures; NGOs identified 16 trafficking victims in the detention center during the reporting period, compared with 49 victims the NGO identified in 2019. In response to the pandemic, DGS announced only detainees with pending judicial action would be held at the detention center and other detainees would be released with the option of temporary residency or repatriation assistance. DGS reported that as of September 2020, DGS had released and repatriated 600 of the 700 detainees that had been at the center at the start of the reporting period. The NGO continued to report high levels of professionalism, sensitivity, and awareness among DGS officials and investigators, which allowed the NGO to more effectively identify victims among detainees.

Victims could file civil suits to obtain compensation; 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; the government did not report whether this provision was used during the reporting period. In addition, victims could provide testimony via video or written statement, but the government did not report whether this was used during the reporting period. Victims were also allowed to reside in Lebanon during an investigation of a trafficking case upon a judge’s decision, but the government did not report that any judges issued such a decision during the reporting period. 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 the criminal proceedings. An international organization reported pandemic-related lockdowns and airport closures further encouraged victims to return home rather than remaining in Lebanon under severe lockdown measures and poor economic conditions. Therefore, authorities faced challenges pursuing potential cases of trafficking when victims chose voluntary repatriation rather than facing an often-lengthy trial process because they were not present in the country to testify against their traffickers. 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.

PREVENTION

The government maintained weak efforts to prevent trafficking. The national anti-trafficking commission under the National Human Rights Committee continued to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts during the reporting period. The government did not adopt its 2013 draft national anti-trafficking action plan, but relevant ministries continued to implement portions of the plan. The government, at times in coordination with NGOs and international organizations, conducted public awareness campaigns during the reporting period. The MOJ also planned a conference with international organizations and NGOs to mark World Day Against Trafficking in Persons in July 2020, but the government canceled the conference due to pandemic-related restrictions. DGS and the MOL continued to operate hotlines to receive reports of abuse and migrant worker complaints, including suspected trafficking crimes. The MOL hotline received 300 calls, and the DGS hotline received 211 calls during the reporting period. The government did not report whether the government identified any victims or initiated any investigations as a result of these calls. DGS continued a program to inform *artiste* visa holders about restrictions and obligations of their visa status upon arrival to Beirut International Airport. Under the program, if the visa holder objected to the

visa’s terms, they were free to return to their home country. DGS reported that seven women who entered the country on an *artiste* visa chose to return immediately to their home countries without continuing to their place of employment during the reporting period. 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 ultimately confiscated workers’ passports in private.

The government continued coordinating a working group with an international organization focused on reforming the sponsorship system established in the previous reporting period. In September 2020, the caretaker Minister of Labor approved a draft standardized work contract for migrant domestic workers drafted in the previous reporting period as part of the working group’s efforts. However, in October 2020, the State Shura Council suspended the use of the new standardized contract following a legal challenge by a trade organization representing recruitment agencies. The standardized contract remained suspended at the end of the reporting period. MOL finalized standardized operating procedures begun in the previous reporting period to refer migrant workers to services that call the MOL’s complaint hotline. Because many domestic workers became unemployed due to the economic crisis, DGS waived requirements for notarized employer approval for workers to change employers during the reporting period; the government did not report for how long these requirements would be waived. A 2015 ministerial decree prohibited recruitment agencies from requesting or receiving any worker-paid recruitment fees, but the government acknowledged there were numerous unregistered recruitment agencies operating illegally which may have charged migrant workers recruitment fees. In 2020, the MOL closed six recruitment agencies for labor violations or complaints of mistreating migrant domestic workers. The MOL also maintained a list of an unknown number of recruitment agencies that had committed fraudulent recruitment practices. The government, however, 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, there were 250,000 migrant domestic workers in Lebanon in 2019. Lebanese government officials and NGOs report 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 that such abuse of domestic workers is typically underreported. Many migrant workers arrive in Lebanon through legal employment agencies but are subsequently exploited or abused by their employers, and some employment agencies recruit workers through fraudulent or false job offers. The prolonged economic crisis exacerbated by the pandemic prompted approximately 30,000 migrant workers to leave Lebanon in 2020. New migrant worker arrivals in Lebanon dropped as much as 75 percent in 2020, compared with 2019, according to media estimates; an international organization reported only 9,409 migrant domestic workers were recruited in 2020, compared with 33,075 recruited in 2019. NGOs reported employers dropped domestic workers off at their embassies during the reporting period because they were unable to continue paying salaries, and an international organization reported renewals of migrant domestic worker contracts decreased from 151,121 in 2019 to 109,672 in 2020. In 2020, an international organization reported an increase in cases of victims exploited by nationals of their own country of origin, particularly among migrant workers. Traffickers among the same nationality coerce migrant workers that have been fired or abandoned by their Lebanese employer into domestic servitude or sex trafficking. In 2020, NGOs reported demand for domestic workers already in Lebanon increased due to pandemic-related travel restrictions and the economic crisis. NGOs reported the combined impact of the economic crisis, pandemic restrictions, and the August 2020 port explosion in Beirut increased vulnerability of Lebanese nationals to trafficking. NGOs and international organizations reported an increase in 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* visas 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 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 was significantly lower in 2020; the government reported 3,376 *artiste* visa holders entered Lebanon in 2019, compared with 774 in 2020. The government reported 29 out of 42 adult nightclubs closed permanently during the reporting period due to the economic crisis and pandemic-mitigation shutdowns, after which *artiste* visa holders either returned to their home country 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 trafficking and forced labor. Restrictions on Syrians’ ability to work legally in Lebanon and the enforcement of visa and residence 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 the cost of transit to

Lebanon, and they contract out groups of refugees to work in the agricultural sector in the Bekaa Valley. Similarly, an international organization reports 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 continues 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 Bekaa and Akkar. For example, in 2019, international organizations reported the presence of children working in illegal cannabis farms in the North Bekaa region. Furthermore, NGOs report 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 who were 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 and Turkey, 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 were vulnerable to sex trafficking in Turkey.

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