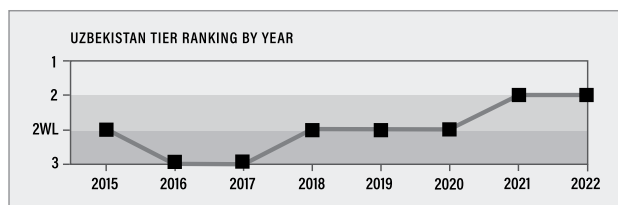


UZBEKISTAN: TIER 2

The Government of Uzbekistan 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, if any, on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Uzbekistan remained on Tier 2. These efforts included prosecuting, convicting, and sentencing more traffickers; prosecuting officials allegedly complicit in forced labor in the cotton harvest; and identifying more victims. Authorities also increased funding for victim shelters, continued to dedicate funding to the Community Works Fund, and continued to significantly reduce the incidence of forced labor in the annual cotton harvest. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. Local officials in some districts continued to impose cotton production quotas in contravention of the national ban on the practice, perpetuating incentives for the mobilization of civil servants into cotton harvest forced labor in some areas of the country. Existing laws establishing forced labor as an administrative violation at first offense continued to constrain effective enforcement. The absence of victim-witness protection policies hindered some investigations and prosecutions; additionally, some law enforcement officials lacked a victim-centered approach when working with victims, potentially discouraging them from cooperating in investigations and prosecutions.



PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Vigorously strengthen enforcement of the national ban on cotton production quotas at local levels and continue substantive action to end all government-compelled forced labor. • Strengthen continued efforts to ensure all 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. • Amend the provision, under Article 148 (2) of the Criminal Code, to remove the option for administrative violations for first time offenders of adult forced labor. • Respecting due process, increase investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of trafficking crimes and adequately sentence convicted traffickers, including officials involved in mobilizing forced labor. • Establish and implement a legal framework to regulate labor brokers involved in the recruitment of seasonal agricultural workers. • Continue to grant and expand the access of independent observers to monitor cotton cultivation and fully cease the harassment, detention, and abuse of activists and journalists for documenting labor conditions. • Amend Article 135 of the Criminal Code to prevent allowing house arrest in lieu of imprisonment for sex trafficking crimes and ensure penalties are commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. • Train all first responders to officially identify potential trafficking victims and refer them to care, including among vulnerable populations such as returned migrants, foreign nationals, and Uzbekistani families repatriated from armed conflict zones. • Ensure an equitable and transparent process in the allocation of land for cotton clusters, including by increasing oversight of worker contracts, and ensure workers have bargaining power and the choice of cluster-affiliation. • Expand space for civil society and freedom of association for labor activists, including by ensuring local governments do not interfere with the formation of labor unions and by removing obstacles to streamline and increase registration of anti-trafficking NGOs. • Continue training law enforcement officials and labor inspectors on proper identification and handling of trafficking cases, with an emphasis on anti-trafficking legislation and evidence gathering

procedures. • Establish a victim-witness program to ensure a victim-centered approach to any participation in criminal justice proceedings and increase training for prosecutors and judges to proactively seek victim restitution in criminal cases. • Improve anti-trafficking coordination and communication between government agencies, NGOs, and the international donor community by establishing a secretariat within the national trafficking in persons commission and allocate adequate funding. • Amend legislation to ensure victims are not penalized for any unlawful acts traffickers compel them to commit, particularly for illegal border crossings or loss of personal identification documents. • Monitor private employment agencies for recruitment fees and ensure they are paid by employers rather than prospective job applicants.

PROSECUTION

The government continued to increase law enforcement efforts. Article 135 of the criminal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of three to five years’ imprisonment for offenses involving an adult victim and eight to 12 years’ imprisonment for those involving a child victim, which were sufficiently stringent. However, with respect to sex trafficking, by allowing for house arrest in lieu of imprisonment, these penalties were not commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. Inconsistent with the definition of trafficking under international law, Article 135 established the use of force, fraud, or coercion as aggravating factors rather than essential elements of the crime. Article 148 (2) of the criminal code addressed “administrative forced labor.” Such offenses involving adult victims were only considered administrative violations for first time offenses; repeated offenses were penalized with a fine or imprisonment of up to two years. Article 148 (2) criminalized all “administrative forced labor” offenses involving children with a fine or up to three years’ imprisonment. Civil society and government contacts alike have noted these provisions, coupled with limited capacity to identify the crime among judicial officials and frontline officers, significantly constrained Uzbekistan’s ability to prosecute and convict labor traffickers.

The government reported conducting 162 investigations, including 96 for sex trafficking, 11 for labor trafficking, and 55 involving unspecified exploitation of children, compared with 566 investigations in 2020. The government reported prosecuting 107 cases, including 46 cases for sex trafficking, eight for forced labor, and 53 involving unspecified exploitation of children, involving 155 suspects, compared with 93 prosecutions involving 129 defendants in 2020. Because of a tendency to conflate cases involving “sexual intercourse with a person under the age of 16” with sex trafficking and illegal adoption with child exploitation, it is possible some of the 162 reported investigations contained elements inconsistent with international law. The government reported convicting 154 defendants for crimes involving trafficking in 2021, compared with 100 in 2020. Of the 154 convicted traffickers, courts sentenced 94 to imprisonment, 43 to house arrest, two to correctional labor, and 15 to probation, compared with sentencing 33 to imprisonment, 35 to house arrest, one to correctional labor, and 20 to probation in 2020. Law enforcement efforts were, at times, constrained by gaps in technical capacity, lack of familiarity with existing laws, insufficient evidence gathering procedures, and poor coordination between the labor inspectorate and judicial officials. Some law enforcement officers were hesitant to investigate trafficking crimes due to a perception that cases would be too difficult to prosecute. The Prosecutor General’s Office worked closely with counterparts in Kazakhstan to extradite two Uzbekistani individuals involved in trafficking crimes back to Uzbekistan during the reporting period; the case remained pending at the end of the reporting period. The government signed MOUs with South Korea, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Belarus, and Turkey to enhance law enforcement collaboration on transnational crimes, including trafficking. Observers reported there may have been some delays in trafficking cases due to the impact of the pandemic. In previous years, victims reached financial settlements outside of the justice system, in some cases with the facilitation of low-level officials. The government’s requirement for law enforcement to obtain hard evidence in order to open a trafficking case, noting victim testimony alone was not sufficient, inhibited law enforcement’s ability to fully investigate all trafficking crimes.

The Ministry of Interior (MOI) maintained an investigatory unit dedicated to trafficking crimes. In November 2021, the government established

procedures for entering trafficking data into the government's Unified Information Database on Crimes, which includes information on traffickers and trafficking crimes; the database was not yet operational by the end of the reporting period. The government continued to provide trafficking-specific training, seminars, and conferences to police, judges, and other government officials, including the labor inspectorate, and conducted some activities in partnership with international organizations and civil society.

The labor inspectorate continued to gather evidence against local *hokims* and other officials for their alleged involvement in cotton harvest-related crimes, including trafficking. The government administratively penalized 65 officials for violating labor laws during the reporting period, compared with 170 in 2020; fines totaled 198.4 million soum (\$18,360), compared with 653.2 soum (\$62,450) in 2020. The government reported five officials were prosecuted under Article 51 of the Code of Administrative Liability for allowing forced labor in the cotton harvest; the five officials were removed from their jobs, but the cases remained pending at the end of the reporting period. The government did not report criminally prosecuting any officials for their alleged complicity in forced labor crimes. Observers reported individuals with political connections are more likely to go unpunished for crimes they commit, including human trafficking. Police continued to arbitrarily detain and threaten LGBTQI+ persons under legislation criminalizing homosexuality, at times resorting to threats and physical abuse to extort bribes or coerce them into informant roles or pornography; authorities spuriously charged some LGBTQI+ persons under anti-prostitution provisions. The government reported coordinating with international law enforcement agencies and counterparts from other countries through diplomatic missions abroad to coordinate the return of an Uzbekistani victims.

PROTECTION

The government increased protection efforts. Authorities identified 175 victims of trafficking in 2021, compared with 150 in 2020. Of the 175 victims, 120 were victims of sex trafficking, 33 were victims of forced labor, and 22 were victims of unspecified exploitation, compared with 89, 12, and 49, respectively, in 2020; all victims were Uzbekistani citizens exploited within Uzbekistan—there were 124 women and 38 men (compared with 138 and 12, respectively, in 2020), 12 girls, and one boy. Of the cases categorized as unspecified exploitation, the government did not report if these included sex trafficking or forced labor indicators. The government did not identify any foreign national victims, but reported foreign victims are entitled to the same benefits as citizens of Uzbekistan. An NGO identified and assisted 327 victims.

The government had standard operating procedures (SOPs) for victim identification and referral, which outlined ministries authorized to make initial victim identification and approve victims for receipt of government assistance, after which cases would be referred to local trafficking in persons commissions for final verification. Officials authorized to identify trafficking victims could refer victims to either a state-run shelter or NGOs for services. Civil society observers previously expressed concern that the two-step verification process in the SOPs was not sufficiently detailed or inclusive of NGO roles, lacked victim-centered approaches outlined in relevant legislation, was overly bureaucratic in nature, and might therefore incentivize territorial commissions to refer victims to NGO services directly, rather than first confirming victim designation with officials. In October 2021, the government released guidance to enhance the use of its SOPs on the identification and protection of victims, with support from an international organization. Experts have noted that the implementation of the SOPs is limited—regional branches of the Subcommittee on Combating Trafficking in Persons have minimal knowledge on the legislation and the crime, in some cases do not want to take responsibility for victim identification, and have an unclear division of labor. Regional governors who chair TIP commissions and make the final decision on granting victim status do not have dedicated funds to assist victims and therefore are not incentivized to grant such status. Due to insufficient use of formal identification procedures, authorities may have detained some unidentified trafficking victims, including individuals in commercial sex and migrant workers. Some victims were reluctant to contact or cooperate with law enforcement due to distrust in the authorities and fear for their personal and familial safety. Local

officials regularly referred victims who did not wish to pursue a criminal case to NGO offices for assistance. During the previous reporting period, the government adopted Resolution No.60 “On the Referral System for Victims of Trafficking in Persons or Presumed Victims of Trafficking in Persons,” which specifies measures for victim identification and designations of government agencies, as well as offices responsible, and it includes the implementation of measures to prevent risk of re-traumatization. Under the new resolution, 153 victims of trafficking were referred to protection services.

The government reported it referred all 175 identified victims of trafficking to care, compared with no victims referred in 2020 and 171 in 2019; all victims received services at the Republican Rehabilitation Center, which provided shelter, medical, psychological care, and legal services. An NGO supported the repatriation of 295 victims and provided legal consultations to 241 victims and 178 vulnerable migrants, including 134 legal consultations on recovery of wages. A local NGO provided legal and psycho-social services and return and reintegration support to 250 individuals, including trafficking victims, returned migrants, and at-risk groups. In 2021, the government allocated 1.03 billion soum (\$95,320) for the Republican Rehabilitation Center and an additional 5.5 billion soum (\$508,990) to support the activities of other shelters for trafficking victims (compared with 1.2 billion soum (\$111,050) and 962 million soum (\$89,030) in the previous reporting period). The government continued to provide in-kind support to local NGOs for the provision of victim assistance, such as food and clothing, and for the second consecutive year, it reported provision of direct funding assistance to some anti-trafficking NGOs—345 million soum (\$31,930) (compared with 451 million soum (\$41,740) in the previous reporting period). The government did not report accommodating foreign victims in the center since 2009. The government also operated 197 centers to assist victims of violence, including trafficking victims; these centers were managed and funded by regional governments, some of which coordinated with local anti-trafficking organizations. However, observers reported concerns that some centers did not provide adequate protection. In addition, the government established 29 centers throughout the country for female victims of violence. Civil society observers noted ongoing delays in NGO registration constrained some civil society efforts to monitor and assist victims, including in the cotton harvest.

Per Article 27 of the law, victims of human trafficking were exempted from civil, administrative, and criminal liability for acts committed under coercion. Current law did not explicitly exempt transnational sex and labor trafficking victims from facing a criminal penalty for illegally crossing international borders, which may have deterred some victims from reporting their traffickers. As part of its “*Mehr*” or “Compassion” campaign, the government also located and repatriated Uzbekistani women and children (more than 120 women and 380 children) who had traveled with their male relatives to Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan and had subsequently been confined to camps, often in exploitative conditions. Although the government did not identify any of these women or children as victims of trafficking, it funded and provided them with shelter, education, legal, limited psychosocial care, and other medical services for five-week cycles throughout the reporting period—some NGO observers have previously claimed capacity was low among psycho-social care providers in these facilities.

Although victims could bring civil suits against traffickers, such instances were rare due to the high cost of legal representation, which was neither provided by the government nor affordable to most victims. Authorities reported legal services were offered by the government but did not report if these services were provided to any victims during the reporting period. NGOs filed 11 applications to initiate criminal cases on behalf of victims; authorities reported three criminal cases were initiated as a result (compared with none in the previous reporting period). Authorities did not report support for victims' participation in investigations or prosecutions of alleged traffickers. Experts reported the government does not adequately ensure victim's protection in court trials, as reporting victims were verbally attacked and threatened; authorities also allowed perpetrators and victims to enter the courtrooms at the same time. Observers reported some victims felt pressured and ashamed as court trials are open to the public and held in victims' communities; due to the lack of safety, victims sometimes refuse to testify against traffickers. In 2021, courts ordered 52 trafficking victims

to receive \$55,853 in restitution—no information was provided whether the victims collected any funds.

PREVENTION

The government maintained prevention efforts. The government's National Commission on Trafficking in Persons and Forced Labor (the Commission) coordinated anti-trafficking efforts with the Chair of the Senate serving as the National Rapporteur. The Commission convened four meetings in 2021, which included participation from government agencies, regional government representatives, and civil society. The Commission directed the activities of regional commissions in 12 regions, one autonomous republic, and one independent city (Tashkent). Some international observers described insufficient coordination and communication between the Commission and civil society partners in the absence of a secretariat structure. The government did not centrally allocate funding for the Commission, which instead required funding contributions from individual member ministries' budgets; this arrangement reportedly led to overreliance on NGO and international assistance. The government reportedly updated its national action plan to reflect input from international stakeholders in 2021 but did not provide information on these updates.

A combination of ongoing robust mechanization efforts, continued awareness-raising activities, continued consolidation of the cotton sector into a privatized "cluster"-based system, increased wages for cotton pickers, some improved recruitment practices, and the government-facilitated voluntary participation of unemployed individuals continued to significantly reduce the incidence of forced labor in the 2021 harvest. According to the ILO, reports of forced labor in cotton picking decreased by 75 percent in 2021 (compared with 33 percent in 2020). Monitors noted signs of coercion in only 1 percent of cotton pickers interviewed (compared with 4 percent in 2020 and 6 percent in 2019). Representatives from the ILO and civil society reported only a small number of scattered instances of forced labor persisted in the annual cotton harvest. The government continued to implement ILO recommendations, further reduced land allocated for cotton cultivation, and purchased more machinery to work toward the mechanization of the harvest. In 2021, the government reported increasing the total number of private textile-cotton clusters to 124—28 more than the previous year—accounting for nearly 100 percent of arable production land (an increase from 90 percent in 2020). The clusters processed cotton from cultivation to finished textile products and paid higher wages to workers.

While most observers assessed the government had made significant strides in combating forced labor in the cotton sector, including by abolishing the national cotton quota in 2020, experts noted the incentive structures that supported government-led coercion in the past remained, functioning much like the former quota system as mahallas (neighborhood-level governments) still recruited cotton pickers, whose benefits they control, to meet the local government targets in direct violation of the decree. Mahallas sometimes resorted to coercive practices to recruit pickers due to shortages in some regions or at some stages of the harvest. International experts reported the limited cases of forced labor involved perceived threats rather than explicit coercion; there is an expectation and belief that refusal results in negative consequences, such as losing a job or benefits, particularly among health care workers, teachers, employees of state-owned enterprises, and local government staff, as well as individuals who receive public benefits. Employees of public institution have reportedly been forced to pay for replacement pickers if they refused to participate in the harvest in the past. NGOs have reported in the past that many of the voluntary pickers preferred to be hired as replacement pickers by those seeking to avoid the cotton fields, as this enabled them to earn income beyond the standard picking wages. Civil society experts noted continuous involvement of government officials in the organization of the harvest can lead to the use of coercion due to the disparate power balance from a reliance on mahalla to recruit pickers and a lack of independent recruitment systems. Civil society experts have reported clusters do not typically face any penalties from local officials when they violate contract obligations with farmers—such as delay of payments for cotton delivered. *Hokims* have reportedly forced farmers to sign contracts with the clusters in their districts. Media and civil society reports indicated ongoing development of the privatized cluster system inadvertently generated other vulnerabilities, including

avenues for private businesses to subject harvest workers to contract violations, loss of bargaining power or choice of cluster-affiliation, coerced cultivation of cotton under threat of land loss, wage irregularities, and forced overtime. Some authorities reportedly expropriated land formerly leased or owned by individual farmers for the creation of new cluster sites without adequately compensating them, increasing their vulnerability to forced labor at those cluster sites. NGO observers noted the absence of a legal framework to ensure oversight of worker contracts and regulate and ensure proper licensing of labor recruitment intermediaries left seasonal agricultural workers vulnerable to forced labor in some cluster sites. The government continued its commitment to prohibit child labor in the cotton harvest; while there were isolated reports of children working in the fields—these appeared to have involved children trying to earn extra money for their families—there continued to be no reports of systemic mobilization. The government, in coordination with the ILO, continued to conduct awareness-raising campaigns to ensure citizens were aware of their labor rights. *Hokims* were instructed by the Deputy Prime Minister not to use forced labor to pick cotton.

For the seventh consecutive year, the government allowed the ILO to monitor the cotton harvest for child and forced labor, and ILO monitors had unimpeded access to the cotton fields for observations and to interview laborers. The government continued to issue official monitoring access permits to civil society groups. The ILO assessed that government entities compelled 1 percent of the estimated two million pickers who participated in the 2021 harvest—or approximately 20,000 individuals. This figure compares with 80,000 in 2020, 102,000 in 2019, 170,000 in 2018, and 336,000 in 2017. The government maintained the size of the labor inspectorate, keeping the total number of labor investigators assigned to look into these complaints across the country to 600. The labor inspectorate investigated 128 allegations of forced labor violations during the 2021 cotton harvest and conducted monitoring of more than 13,419 farms and privatized cotton clusters. User assessments of the Cotton Harvest Feedback Mechanism in 2021 were not yet available by the end of the reporting period; observers reported concerns about the effectiveness of the mechanism, the credibility and efficacy of ensuing investigations, and fear of retaliation for its use. For the fourth year, the government included independent human rights activists in harvest monitoring, field interviews, awareness raising activities, and the review of cases gathered through the mechanism. Observers previously reported isolated incidents in which local government officials harassed and temporarily detained independent civil society activists who attempted to monitor the cotton harvest. Media, including state media outlets, continued to report on forced labor practices and violations, generally without penalization or censorship; however, at least one high-profile blogger was subjected to politically motivated arrest and sentenced to six-and-a-half years in prison after reporting on issues such as corruption and farmers' rights. In 2021, local authorities reportedly harassed and threatened several activists in response to their efforts to establish Uzbekistan's first independent labor union. Some civil society experts noted a lack of freedom of association for independent monitoring and reporting of labor rights violations.

The government encouraged Ministers to use a special fund under the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations to recruit unemployed individuals for public works, instead of subjecting civil servants and students to forced labor therein. Over the past five years, 1.4 million people have benefitted from 1.3 trillion soum (\$120.3 million) from the Community Works Fund, serving to curtail economic drivers of potential exploitation; 243.3 billion soum (\$22.52 million) was allocated in 2021, compared with 479.6 billion soum (\$44.38 million) in 2020. An NGO previously reported the central government continued to set silk cocoon production quotas. NGO accounts of forced labor in the silk cocoon harvest alleged direct local government involvement and that some silk cocoon clusters forced farmers to sign compulsory contracts, requiring them to provide a specific amount of silk cocoons for every hectare of land—farmers who failed to produce the required quota risked the expropriation of their land by the local government. In 2021, the government, in cooperation with an international organization, carried out a survey of the silk cocoon industry and reported no systemic forced labor and no children in the production of silkworms.

The government continued to provide support to labor migrants abroad, including victims of forced labor, and allocated a budget of 15.5 billion soum (\$1.43 million), an increase from 9.1 billion soum (\$842,150) in 2020. Uzbekistan's Agency for External Labor Migration provided legal, financial, and social assistance to 323,620 labor migrants overseas; the agency also provided entrepreneurship and/or vocational training to 23,878 returned labor migrants. The agency conducted pre-departure consultations with migrant workers, through which it provided information on primary destination countries' labor and immigration laws—especially Russia and Kazakhstan; issued some prospective migrant workers health insurance; and provided micro-loans to cover basic expenses such as transportation and insurance. The government operated a hotline to identify human trafficking victims and refer them to services—the hotline received 840 calls in 2021, and 195 led to criminal investigations; the government did not provide information about the number of victims who received assistance as a result of hotline calls. The Commission also maintained a website where victims could request assistance. The government operated a 24-hour hotline in Russia that provided Uzbekistani labor migrants with legal advice, advised them of their rights, and directed them to the nearest consulate for assistance. An NGO operated a widely publicized 24/7 hotline, which received 12,082 calls on trafficking in 2021—the NGO provided assistance to 2,652 individuals. Additionally, the government, in cooperation with an NGO, provided information and support for labor migrants on safe work abroad and their rights. The government maintained agreements to enhance coordination on labor migration with eight countries, including the four with the highest populations of Uzbekistani labor migrants: Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and South Korea. Private companies, including foreign and local, had official permission from the government to recruit Uzbekistani citizens for jobs abroad and within Uzbekistan. Although the companies were required to obtain recruitment licenses, the government did not report the number of such licenses granted. Labor recruitment laws in Uzbekistan prohibit charging workers recruitment fees; however, it was unclear to what extent authorities enforced this ban.

The government's labor inspectorate reported conducting 27,471 inspections in 2021 in all sectors of the economy, not counting those for farmers and clusters, (compared with 19,226 in 2020), and it collected 24 billion soum (\$2.22 million) in fines (11.6 billion soum [\$1.07 million] in 2020) and contributed the amount to the Community Works Fund. As in previous years, the inspectorate did not report screening for trafficking indicators. Labor inspectors were not empowered to bring criminal charges for first time violations of the law against forced labor, and international observers noted some inspectors also demonstrated limited comfort with their administrative enforcement mandate. Authorities continued to conduct public awareness efforts on transnational sex and labor trafficking, including through events, print media, television, and radio, often in partnership with and through in-kind support to NGOs. The government supported public awareness activities on the trafficking risk in the hotel industry and trafficking awareness raising campaigns for migrants departing airports. The government did not conduct efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. The government reported providing anti-trafficking training for its diplomatic personnel, as they are authorized to identify and refer trafficking victims in their host countries.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit Uzbekistani victims domestically and abroad, and some foreign nationals may be vulnerable to trafficking within Uzbekistan. Forced labor in the annual cotton harvest continues to decrease as a function of ongoing national reforms within the sector; however, isolated instances of forced labor from local officials persist in several areas of the country. The majority of pickers that participated in the most recent cotton harvest were women from rural areas. Some adults who refuse to pick cotton, are unable or unwilling to pay for a replacement worker, or do not fulfill their daily quota, at times feel threatened by the loss of social benefits, termination of employment, or other forms of harassment. Some employees and market vendors choose to hire a replacement picker directly, pay a fee for the mobilizer to find a replacement picker, or pay a fine, rather than pick cotton; this generates a coercive arrangement that penalizes those who choose not to participate in the harvest while

also creating a lucrative means of extortion for corrupt managers and officials. Private companies in some regions mobilize employees for the harvest. Farmers forced to vacate and remit their land to private cotton operators are at high risk of forced labor, including in the cluster sites established on their former land, due to disruption of livelihoods and ensuing economic hardships.

Local government officials subject adults to forced labor in other sectors as well. Some local officials reportedly provide silkworms to farmers and force them to sign contracts stating they will agree to cultivate silk cocoons in furtherance of national production quotas. Despite a 2018 government prohibition on the practice, some local officials continue to force teachers, students (including children), private businesses employees, and others to work in construction and other forms of non-cotton agriculture and to clean parks, streets, and buildings. Officials occasionally cast these compulsory tasks as part of Uzbekistan's traditional *Hashar* system, under which community members are expected to perform voluntary work for communal benefit. Criminalization of same-sex relationships between men makes some members of Uzbekistan's LGBTQI+ communities vulnerable to police abuse, extortion, and coercion into pornography and informant roles; widespread social stigma and discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals also compound their vulnerability to family-brokered forced marriages that may feature corollary sex trafficking or forced labor indicators. Children in institutions are vulnerable to sex trafficking. According to international organization experts, 24 percent of children in Uzbekistan live in poverty and many end up working to help their families, facing high risk for trafficking. Traffickers exploit Uzbekistani nationals domestically in brothels, clubs, and private residences.

Traffickers exploit Uzbekistani nationals in sex trafficking and forced labor in the Middle East, including in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates; in Europe, including Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Moldova, Russia, and Turkey; and in Central, South, and East Asia, including in Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, respectively. Uzbekistani nationals are subjected to forced labor in these regions in the construction, transportation, oil and gas, agricultural, retail, and food sectors. Hundreds of thousands of Uzbekistani migrant workers are at elevated risk of trafficking within Russia, where employers and authorities charge high work permit fees that catalyze debt-based coercion, subject them to poor living and working conditions, and garnish or withhold their wages; these vulnerabilities are often compounded by Russian employers' failure to register Uzbekistani migrant workers with the relevant authorities. More than half of Uzbekistani migrant workers reportedly forego the complex bureaucratic processes required to obtain proper documentation, exacerbating their vulnerability within the system. More than 70 percent of Uzbekistani migrants abroad reside in Russia, many Uzbekistani migrants face unemployment amidst the current Russian invasion of Ukraine, and thousands have returned to Uzbekistan, making them vulnerable to exploitation. Due to the dependence on remittances, families of Uzbekistani migrants working in Russia may become vulnerable as the value of the ruble continues to decrease and as they face obstacles in transferring money from Russia. Some Uzbekistani men travel to Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan to fight alongside or seek employment within armed groups and are subsequently subjected to forced labor in cooking, cleaning, and portering. Uzbekistani women and children traveling with these men are also vulnerable to sex trafficking and forced labor on arrival; many are reportedly placed alongside other Uzbekistani family members in makeshift camp communities, where their travel and identity documentation is confiscated and their freedom of movement is restricted. Many of these women report having lost their husbands to armed conflict, after which their economic hardships and confinement in the camps make them vulnerable to coercive local marriages that may feature corollary sex trafficking or forced labor indicators.

VANUATU: TIER 2

The Government of Vanuatu 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