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2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bangladesh

BANGLADESH (Tier 2)

The Government of Bangladesh 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 with the previous reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Bangladesh remained on Tier 2. These efforts included increasing prosecutions and convictions against traffickers, increasing investigations of cases involving Rohingya victims for the first time in recent years, and taking steps to lower some recruitment fees associated with the government-run recruitment agency. The government extended its NAP to 2025 and published its first national study on human trafficking in Bangladesh. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. Although the government increased law enforcement efforts, it did not take adequate steps to address internal sex trafficking or official complicity, both of which remained pervasive; and it did not consistently hold accountable sub-agents conducting illegal recruitment operations. Victim protection efforts remained insufficient, including shelter services and availability, and the government identified and referred to care significantly fewer victims. The government did not uniformly employ SOPs to identify trafficking victims, including among vulnerable populations, and authorities continued to conflate human trafficking and migrant smuggling in many cases. Furthermore, courts sentenced the majority of traffickers to fines rather than jail time, which weakened deterrence, undercut the government's overall anti-trafficking efforts, and likely created security and safety concerns for victims.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Increase efforts to investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes, including complicit officials, and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms.
- Increase efforts to identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, including adopting formal victim identification procedures and screening processes to prevent inappropriate penalization of potential victims, and refer victims to appropriate services.
- Strengthen the capacity of Anti-Trafficking Tribunal personnel to prosecute and adjudicate human trafficking cases, and expand tribunals to heavy caseload areas.
- Increase training for officials, including law enforcement, labor inspectors, immigration officers, and health care providers, on identification of trafficking cases and referring victims to services.
- Expand services for trafficking victims, especially adult male victims, foreign victims, and victims exploited abroad, and allow NGOs improved access to trafficking victims in government shelters.
- Implement and consistently enforce regulations and oversight of labor recruitment companies, *dalals* (sub-agents), and brokers who supply labor to recruiting agencies, including by eliminating recruitment fees charged to workers and holding fraudulent recruiters criminally accountable.
- Increase investigations and prosecutions of credible allegations of trafficking of Rohingya, including cases that do not involve movement, and establish clear procedures for Rohingya to file complaints in the legal system.

- Improve quality of pre-departure trainings for migrant workers, including sessions on labor rights, labor laws, and access to justice and overseas assistance.
- Increase oversight of, and protections for, workers in the informal sectors, including home-based workers, and enable labor inspectors to file cases in labor or criminal courts as appropriate.
- Increase monitoring to prevent child sex trafficking, particularly children who are experiencing homelessness or use the streets as a source of livelihood, as well as the children of adults engaged in commercial sex in brothels.

PROSECUTION

The government increased overall law enforcement efforts. The 2012 Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (PSHTA) criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of five years to life imprisonment and a fine of not less than 50,000 Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) (\$476). Bonded labor was treated as a separate crime with lesser prescribed penalties of five to 12 years' imprisonment and a fine of not less than 50,000 BDT (\$476). These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with regard to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as kidnapping.

The government increased prosecutions and convictions against human trafficking, although it did not take adequate steps to address internal sex trafficking or official complicity, both of which remained pervasive. The government reported that it investigated 480 cases involving 2,033 suspects, including 39 sex trafficking cases, 269 labor trafficking cases, and 172 cases for unspecified forms of trafficking, and continued to investigate 712 cases from previous years. This compared with the investigation of 594 cases involving 2,587 suspects and continued investigation of 449 cases during the previous reporting period. The police initiated prosecution of 923 suspects – 14 for sex trafficking, 398 for forced labor, and 511 for unspecified forms of trafficking – and continued prosecution of 906 suspects from the previous reporting period. This compared with prosecution of 620 suspects in the previous reporting period. The seven Anti-Human Trafficking Tribunals, launched in 2020, enabled the government to significantly increase the number of human trafficking prosecutions. The courts and tribunals convicted 94 traffickers in 35 cases, including 78 convictions in 30 cases from the Dhaka Tribunal, 14 convictions in four cases from the Rajshahi tribunal, and two convictions in a case from the Barishal tribunal. This was an increase compared to the previous reporting period when courts convicted 18 traffickers in 11 cases. Courts sentenced most traffickers to fines, with 33 traffickers receiving terms of imprisonment and 61 traffickers receiving penalties of fines only. Although convictions increased, the imposition of fines rather than jail time weakened deterrence, undercut the government's overall anti-trafficking efforts, and likely created security and safety concerns, particularly for victims who cooperated with investigations and prosecutions. Despite convictions data from only the cases filed under the PSHTA, the government likely reported non-human trafficking cases in its investigation and prosecution statistics, including potential cases of migrant smuggling. Law enforcement efforts were under-resourced and hindered by limited expertise on anti-trafficking investigations, inadequate evidence, and a reliance on victim-witnesses in criminal proceedings. In addition, tribunal judges reportedly prioritized case disposal targets and failed to adequately consider the merits of individual cases; judgments did not always align with PSHTA sentencing guidelines. Police and prosecutors often did not collaborate well with one another, which led to delays and the formation of weak cases. The government continued to train police officers through an anti-trafficking module at the police academy and conducted anti-trafficking training for judges and prosecutors. The government also continued to nominate participants and provide in-kind support to international organization- and NGO-run trainings for judicial, immigration, and border officials. Observers noted that tribunal judges, prosecutors, and staff require further anti-trafficking training and incentives to effectively try cases while respecting due process.

Judges and special prosecutors comprise the Anti-Human Trafficking Tribunals, which are assigned to hear human trafficking cases and address the substantial case backlog. The Anti-Human Trafficking Tribunals heard trafficking cases in seven of Bangladesh's eight division capitals;

judges responsible for courts that heard cases involving violence against women and children handled trafficking issues in the other 57 districts. Although the specialized tribunals reportedly reduced Bangladesh's human trafficking case backlog, the tribunals could not try ancillary crimes and many trafficking cases remained pending. However, the government reported the number of pending cases declined compared with the previous year, noting a decrease to 4,732 pending cases from July to September 2022 as compared with 5,219 pending cases from July to September 2021. The government previously announced plans to open additional tribunals, including in Cox's Bazar; however, it did not establish any new tribunals during the reporting period. The government continued to allow mobile courts, established under the executive branch, to adjudicate labor violations, although the courts could not address labor trafficking claims.

Some officials lacked understanding of human trafficking and, at times, conflated it with migrant smuggling or fraudulent labor practices. Some officials continued to deny the existence of internal trafficking, especially child sex trafficking, despite ongoing evidence. In cross-border cases, Bangladeshi officials struggled to coordinate with foreign investigative agencies, request and collect international evidence, and extradite suspected traffickers, likely resulting in underreporting of transnational cases. Bangladeshi police coordinated with INTERPOL on transnational trafficking cases, and at least one Bangladeshi embassy coordinated with foreign law enforcement to remove Bangladeshi nationals from trafficking situations in the Middle East. The government maintained mutual legal assistance pacts, notably including India and South Africa, to support investigations of ongoing trafficking cases and maintained extradition treaties with India, South Africa, and other countries to ensure traffickers returned to face trial. In addition, the government began implementing guidelines – developed in partnership with civil society – to use alongside its mutual legal assistance treaty, for cross-border trafficking cases with India.

The government did not sufficiently investigate and prosecute trafficking cases involving the exploitation of Rohingya refugees. Despite continued reports of traffickers exploiting Rohingya in forced labor and sex trafficking within Bangladesh, most Rohingya-related cases reported by law enforcement involved movement via boat, cases that may have amounted to migrant smuggling without elements of trafficking. Although the PSHTA included a provision for non-citizens to file trafficking cases, the government did not establish clear legal reporting mechanisms within refugee camps, which impeded Rohingyas' access to the criminal justice system and increased impunity for offenders. Observers reported police in Cox's Bazar recorded some cases of Rohingya trafficking during the reporting period. Police and international humanitarian actors maintained multiple help desks in refugee camps to provide legal assistance to female and child refugee crime victims; however, public distrust of police and security services deterred many victims, including trafficking victims, from seeking assistance. Observers alleged some Bangladeshi officials facilitated trafficking of Rohingya, including by accepting bribes from traffickers to gain access to camps.

The government did not acknowledge official complicity in human trafficking and did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes; however, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns, inhibiting law enforcement and judicial action. Some law enforcement officers and prosecutors allegedly decided which cases to investigate and try in court based on the political and financial connections of the accused. Observers alleged some judges may have dismissed cases due to political pressure or a desire to maintain case disposal rates. In registered brothels, some police allegedly charged bribes to ignore abuse within the establishments, did not check for the required age documentation, and procured fraudulent documents for girls as young as 10 years old. Government corruption reportedly included officials operating international border crossings, and some police allegedly accepted bribes to release victims back to traffickers. In addition, government officials, including some parliamentarians and their families, maintained close ties to lucrative foreign employment agencies that often operated with limited oversight. Many recruitment agencies reportedly exploited official corruption to profit from overseas migration; previous reports included allegations of agencies bribing officials to allow them to charge recruitment fees to workers many times higher than the legal maximum. These practices increased workers' vulnerability to debt-based coercion. Media reported senior officials with the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) allegedly charged exorbitant fees to expatriate workers for fake exit clearance cards to facilitate non-existent jobs in the United Arab

Emirates. Observers also reported some local politicians convinced victims to accept payment from recruitment sub-agents in lieu of reporting fraudulent or exploitative labor recruitment actions to police.

PROTECTION

The government made mixed progress on protection efforts. The government did not report anti-trafficking data consistently from year to year, making it difficult to assess accurately the trafficking situation in country, discern year-to-year trends, and compare data. The government identified 240 trafficking victims, including 115 sex trafficking victims, 92 forced labor victims, and 33 victims of unspecified forms of trafficking. This number was much lower than the 1,138 victims reportedly identified in the previous reporting period, which likely included victims of other crimes. Observers noted the actual number of victims identified by the government during the reporting period was likely much higher due to insufficient data gathering throughout the year. Civil society and international organizations reported identifying at least 6,781 trafficking victims, including 961 for sex trafficking, 3,764 for labor trafficking, and 2,056 for unspecified forms of trafficking.

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA), the government's lead ministry for combating trafficking, had SOPs for proactive trafficking victim identification; however, the SOPs were not widely disseminated or used by officials across government ministries. Observers noted the absence of a standard victim identification procedure resulted in many law enforcement agencies attempting to follow the PSHTA with significant misunderstandings; a standard step-by-step guideline for victim identification remained pending approval. The government – in coordination with NGOs and trafficking victims – continued to develop a national referral mechanism, which remained pending at the end of the reporting period.

Government officials often lacked a victim-centered approach when interacting with potential trafficking victims and survivors. Law enforcement did not uniformly employ SOPs to identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, including individuals engaged in commercial sex and, as a result, may have inappropriately penalized sex trafficking victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Police enforcement operations at brothels resulted in arrests of foreign national women for visa violations without efforts to screen for trafficking, and operations targeting hotel-based commercial sex sometimes resulted in law enforcement accusing young women and girls of criminal behavior under PSHTA sections 12 and 13 without attempting to screen for trafficking indicators. Authorities may have also detained and fined trafficking victims at border crossings for false identification, failure to carry a passport, or irregular migration. Border officials reportedly screened migrants for trafficking, although some of these individuals may have been subsequently prosecuted for irregular migration. The government previously penalized some returning Bangladeshi migrant workers with substantial indicators of trafficking without appropriately screening them for trafficking, claiming the individuals were “damaging the image of the nation.” Immigration officials screened suspected trafficking victims at Bangladesh's three international airports and the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE) operated a desk at the Dhaka airport, providing financial assistance and information on available NGO services to returning female migrant workers, including trafficking victims.

The government had a standard policy to refer victims to services, although it required victims to obtain a court-order to access government services, including shelter. The government also required NGOs and international organizations to obtain a separate court order to provide additional services to victims in government shelters. The Department of Social Services (DSS), in partnership with an international organization, took steps to standardize the quality of care across shelter homes and service providers; DSS formally launched its revised comprehensive victim services guidelines to ensure minimum standards of care in government-run shelters. The Ministry

of Women and Children Affairs and Ministry of Social Welfare (MSW) provided services to vulnerable populations, including trafficking victims. The government provided services to 275 victims, a much lower number compared to the 4,272 potential victims it reported during the previous reporting period. Authorities commonly referred victims to government-run shelter homes for services, although the government occasionally referred victims to NGO-run shelters. The government referred at least 232 victims to services compared with the 5,480 victims it reportedly referred to government shelters in the previous reporting period. NGOs and international organizations reported they provided referrals to 191 sex trafficking victims, 1,269 labor trafficking victims, and 560 victims of unspecified forms of trafficking. The MSW operated long-term shelters for women and child victims of violence, including trafficking victims. DSS operated shelters for child victims, including shelters for women, adolescent girls, and children, although observers stated that additional safe houses, including for victims participating in criminal justice proceedings, were needed. The government required trafficking victims without legal residency in Bangladesh to remain in shelters until repatriation to their country of origin, and victims did not enjoy freedom of movement to leave and return freely. Despite legal guidelines to administer services equitably, the government did not consistently view adult men as trafficking victims, and the government did not routinely identify or provide comparable services to male victims. While some NGO shelters could house male victims, the majority of both government and NGO shelters could not; however, most NGOs could provide other services to adult male victims. Cabinet officials approved draft amendments to the Evidence (Amendment) Act 2022 to prohibit the cross-examination of sexual assault victims concerning their character and expanded the admissibility of digital evidence in Bangladeshi courts; Parliament passed the amendment in November 2022.

Counter Trafficking Committee (CTC) members and police used referral directories to refer victims and at-risk individuals to services, although the absence of well-established protocols created challenges referring identified victims to appropriate services. Police operated multiple centers for women and child victims of violence in each of Bangladesh's eight divisions, offering short-term shelter, medical services, and psychological care, including to at least 18 trafficking victims during the reporting period. The government's NGO Affairs Bureau delayed approval for foreign funding to some NGOs working on some human rights issues, which affected availability and provision of services to vulnerable populations, including trafficking victims. The PSHTA entitles victims to protection during judicial proceedings, including police security, and allowed victims to provide testimony via video conference. While some victims participated in the investigation and prosecution of traffickers, insufficient implementation of the protection provision likely contributed to low numbers of victims willing to participate. Observers reported victims and accused traffickers often appeared in court at the same time, and suspects sometimes threatened victims to discourage testifying. The government offered free legal services to trafficking victims through public and special prosecutors; the district offices of the National Legal Aid Service Organization; and government-run District Legal Aid Committees. Some organizations reported victims had difficulty accessing these legal services. The government did not provide legal alternatives to the removal of foreign trafficking victims to countries where they might face hardship or retribution. However, foreign victims of trafficking were legally entitled to the same benefits as Bangladeshi nationals under the PSHTA. The government continued to allow some civil society organizations to provide shelter services without a court order in Cox's Bazar, although the organizations needed to first receive permission from officials overseeing the refugee camps.

The MEWOE maintained 29 labor offices, or labor welfare wings, in embassies and consulates in 26 major destination countries to provide welfare services to Bangladeshi migrant workers through labor attachés trained on trafficking issues. These labor attachés were responsible for reviewing and verifying employment documents. Observers continued to report these labor wings had neither the staffing nor the resources to adequately assist the large number of migrant workers, especially at embassies in Middle Eastern countries with substantial numbers of Bangladeshi workers. MEWOE operated five safe houses abroad for workers with strong indicators of trafficking who fled abusive employers, but it did not report how many victims it assisted among them. While the government-funded the repatriation of some trafficking victims, lengthy delays resulted in many victims funding the travel costs themselves, incurring additional debt. The government largely relied on civil society and international organizations to assist with repatriations of trafficking

victims and provide support to victims after their return. The Rescue, Recovery, Repatriation, and Reintegration (RRRI) Task Force continued to cooperate with India on trafficking cases primarily involving women and children. The MOHA and the Government of India continued to finalize previously drafted victim identification and repatriation SOPs to guide officials in the repatriation process. The governments facilitated, and civil society often funded, repatriation of trafficking victims from India, but without formal SOPs, the lengthy and complex approval process resulted in some Bangladeshi victims languishing in Indian shelters for years.

The government did not consistently initiate criminal investigations into migrant workers exploited abroad and civil remedies remained inadequate. Trafficking victims were entitled to court-ordered restitution from traffickers or compensation from a fund established by the government, although the fund was inadequately resourced. Trafficking victims could also file civil suits seeking compensation. Out-of-court settlements between victims and traffickers remained common, and most settlements involved victims recanting their testimony, effectively eliminating the possibility of the trafficker facing a criminal conviction. MEWOE oversaw an alternative system of arbitration allowing overseas Bangladeshi workers who secured their employment through MEWOE to lodge complaints seeking compensation for labor and recruitment violations, including allegations of forced labor, through an arbitration process. However, the process typically yielded minimal awards. Observers reported BMET, the agency responsible for facilitating arbitration, prohibited victim advocates from accompanying migrant workers, forcing workers to arbitrate claims alone against both powerful recruitment agencies and BMET. The government reported arbitration of trafficking cases with BMET is more common than criminal charges under PSHTA; officials typically encourage the relevant recruiting agency to offer the victim a sum of money to resolve the complaint. As a result, potential human trafficking incidents may be handled as labor issues involving negotiation and arbitration rather than a criminal offense; the civil penalties in these situations are less severe than those under the PHSTA. BMET arbitration resulted in an unspecified number of potential victims each receiving 250,000 BDT (\$2,380).

PREVENTION

The government increased efforts to prevent trafficking. MOHA remained the focal ministry for anti-trafficking efforts and continued to lead the inter-ministerial committee for combating human trafficking, which met bi-monthly to coordinate government activities. The National Authority served as a government-wide supervisory body to combat trafficking and met periodically; however, it required capacity building and further institutionalization to improve inter-ministerial collaboration. Additionally, the government did not clarify the distinct roles of the National Authority versus the inter-ministerial committee, and the National Authority's inactivity often led the government to depend on civil society for coordinating and implementing its anti-trafficking initiatives. The government supported several other task forces and committees to monitor progress on anti-trafficking efforts and to harmonize efforts between government agencies, NGOs, and international organizations. The government continued to support CTCs at district, sub-district, and union levels to facilitate coordination between local governments and civil society to combat human trafficking. Although MOHA did not publicly release its annual data on human trafficking, the government published the first national study on human trafficking, which examined trafficking risk factors and routes as well as recommendations for national responses. The government also adopted its extended anti-trafficking NAP through 2025, and began to implement the plan in coordination with partners. The government continued to focus its anti-trafficking funding disproportionately on prevention efforts, including by directing most NAP funding toward prevention; observers recommended officials increase the plan's financial allocations to prosecution, protection, and partnership efforts, as well as monitoring and evaluation. Additionally, the NAP did not specifically address Rohingya victims of trafficking. The government continued to conduct national awareness campaigns through print media, television, radio, and text messages, as well as through CTCs and community meetings, at times in partnership with civil society. The government conducted trafficking awareness programs in

border districts and held meetings on safe migration; Bangladesh overseas missions also organized awareness events for Bangladeshi expatriate communities. Most campaign materials were only available in Bangla. The government maintained several general helplines to report crime, including human trafficking. The government noted that these hotlines received at least 48 trafficking-related calls in 2022.

The government maintained 15 bilateral labor agreements, in part intended to protect Bangladeshi workers abroad. The government approved an MOU with Greece to promote regular migration and sought to sign additional agreements with other European countries. The government discussed human trafficking with counterparts in southeast Asia and the Middle East. In July 2022, the government created a task force to monitor implementation of the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. The government also began developing a national reintegration policy for migrants to ensure safe returns and successful reintegration in Bangladesh.

The government continued to require Bangladeshi migrants complete pre-departure training, which included safe migration and anti-trafficking components, and a 30-day pre-departure training course for female domestic workers. The government offered safe migration information through district employment and manpower offices and training centers; however, the government did not report how many migrants were aware of these services and accessed them before traveling abroad. Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL), a government-run recruiting agency, organized district-level job fairs to increase awareness of ethical recruitment and safe migration methods among potential migrants. BMET operated approximately 70 technical training centers offering a pre-departure curriculum including labor rights and skills training; however, BMET instruction did not adequately address labor rights, medical care while abroad, or the process for safe returns. To address this, the government revised the curriculum for region- and sector-specific training, but implementation remained pending. In addition, the government made BMET-certified pre-departure orientation sessions available online for migrant workers.

MEWOE continued efforts to amend the Overseas Employment and Migration Act (OEMA), 2013 to bring recruiting agents and representatives under greater oversight and improve transparency; however, the draft legislation remained pending. The 2013 OEMA criminalized fraudulent recruitment and unlawful recruitment fees; however, these provisions still permitted the government to set legal recruitment fees at rates between 85,000 BDT and 262,000 BDT (\$810-\$2,500), high enough to render many migrant workers indebted and vulnerable to trafficking through debt-based coercion, and many migrants paid more than the legally permissible rates. The government established fixed recruitment fees for 16 labor-receiving countries with the largest number of Bangladeshi workers. Some government officials advocated for employer-paid recruitment fee models and the government pursued such models with three countries. This was a notable step, although observers noted migration costs remained high for many destination countries. BOESL reduced its approved recruitment fees to approximately one month's salary for workers traveling to nine destination countries for the first time since 2016. However, workers continued to pay large fees that were greater than the fixed amount to pay for service charges, airfares, passports, visas, medical fees, and other expenses. Observers assessed the high cost of legal migration drove some prospective migrants to unlicensed agents whose promises of alternative paths to overseas employment facilitated exploitation, including human trafficking. The Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) acknowledged that, before beginning the formal recruitment process, migrant workers frequently paid sub-agents – or *dalals* – fees in addition to the legal amount BAIRA agents. *Dalals* also directly connected workers to overseas jobs by providing fake visas and other documentation and, in some cases, incorrect or deceptive information about the migration process and job in the destination country.

The government required recruitment agencies or authorized representatives to receive approval to recruit workers for overseas employment. BAIRA oversaw approximately 1,840 licensed labor recruitment agencies. MEWOE had the authority to register recruiting *dalals* and required brokers to register sub-agents and representatives; the government did not report how it monitored for compliance. MEWOE previously suspended 183 recruitment agencies for operating in violation of the law, including breach of employment contracts and recruitment regulations; however, most of the suspended agencies subsequently resumed operations. MEWOE continued to develop a

classification system to rank licensed recruiting agencies into categories based on compliance with the law, including adherence to government-fixed recruitment fees, number of branch offices, and frequency of complaints. The government's Vigilance Task Force (VTF) – a multiagency effort to monitor and enforce compliance of rules and regulations during the migration process and prevent irregular migration – continued operations against corrupt recruitment agencies, travel agencies, and *dalals* who operated in rural locations and connected prospective migrant workers to licensed employment agencies. The VTF-operated mobile courts received complaints, took legal action against agencies and institutions, disseminated migration information to agencies, and prevented human trafficking under the pretenses of labor migration.

The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) is the only authority responsible for enforcing child labor laws. However, DIFE only had authority to file cases in labor courts – not criminal courts – and the labor courts have never referred a case to the criminal courts. Observers noted the government did not hold officials or business owners accountable for violating existing labor laws, which resulted in worsening conditions for workers. DIFE removed 3,990 children from hazardous conditions through inspections, which may have included trafficking victims, and increased the number of labor inspectors, although the number of labor inspectors remained insufficient. The government reported zero incidents of forced labor in its inputs to the international supply chain, and DIFE reportedly investigated any allegations of forced labor in brick kilns and dry fishing facilities, although no violations were reported. DIFE also implemented a one-year action plan to eliminate child labor from hazardous sectors across the country. Staffing and resources to inspect for labor violations, including forced and child labor, remained severely inadequate; DIFE seldom conducted unannounced inspections and there were no inspectors dedicated to child labor. Inspectors were not empowered to monitor the informal sector despite an estimated 93 percent of child labor – including forced child labor – occurring there. DIFE labor inspectors did not receive routine training on forced labor. Although the DIFE is required to significantly increase the number of labor inspections under the Roadmap to the International Labor Organization, the number of labor inspectors did not meet international standards and the DIFE did not have the legal authority to conduct unannounced inspections in export processing zones.

The government collaborated with the Inter-Sector Coordination Group – responsible for coordinating the activities of humanitarian organizations in the Rohingya refugee response – to disseminate trafficking-related awareness raising messages among Rohingya populations and the host communities. The government facilitated access for international organizations and civil society to conduct anti-trafficking awareness activities in Rohingya camps. However, the government's efforts to prevent trafficking of refugees remained inadequate. Rohingya refugees did not enjoy freedom of movement in Bangladesh, and access to education remained sporadic for many Rohingya youth. Rohingya vulnerability to trafficking increased as a result of a government ban of Rohingya from Bangla language schools, closure of informal schools established by the Rohingya community, and inability of Rohingya to work legally.

The government provided basic anti-trafficking training to Bangladeshi military and police officers prior to their deployment as peacekeepers, and reported it provided anti-trafficking training for its diplomatic personnel. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts, nor did the government make efforts to reduce the demand for child sex tourism.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Bangladesh, and traffickers exploit victims from Bangladesh abroad. The most at-risk groups included victims of child marriage and gender-based violence; poor and marginalized persons; people who lost jobs due to the pandemic; seasonal laborers recruited from northwest districts for destinations in India; poorly educated and unemployed youth and students; people affected by natural disasters and

climate change; Rohingya refugees; and people attempting to reach other countries through irregular migration. A national study conducted with an international organization concluded that economic need is the largest risk factor creating vulnerability to trafficking. The government reported that climate-induced displacement is increasing the vulnerability of Bangladeshis to trafficking; officials estimated that 700,000 people have been displaced each year on average over the previous decade due to natural disasters. Traffickers increasingly relied on social media and mobile messages to lure potential victims, particularly targeting women and girls, for sex and labor trafficking.

Bangladesh is the world's sixth largest migrant-sending country and the eighth largest country receiving remittances, according to an international report in 2022. The government facilitates the migration of tens of thousands of skilled and semi-skilled workers at low-cost or no-cost; however, 90 percent of migrants rely on private recruitment agencies that often charge fees to workers. Most Bangladeshi workers migrate to the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, although traffickers exploit Bangladeshi men, women, and children in southern and eastern Africa, south and southeast Asia – especially Brunei, Malaysia, and Maldives – Europe, and the United States. Bangladeshi migrants are frequently low or unskilled workers, and many migrate for work each year through informal channels where traffickers target them. Before departure, many workers assume debt to pay high recruitment fees, imposed legally by recruitment agencies registered with BAIRA or illegally by unlicensed sub-agents; this places workers at risk of debt-based coercion. Although one study found that the cost of migration has decreased slightly in recent years, Bangladeshi workers continue to pay the highest migration fees in the region. Observers estimated it can take many months for workers to repay loans to recruiters, adding pressure to overstay visas, and increasing vulnerability to trafficking. Some recruitment agencies, agents, and employers also commit recruitment fraud, including contract switching; this includes promising women and children jobs and exploiting them in sex trafficking upon arrival. A Bangladeshi parliamentarian associated with one such employment agency was previously convicted and imprisoned in Kuwait on charges involving bribery to bring thousands of migrant workers to the Middle East. In recent years, destination countries have recorded tens of thousands of cases involving underpayment or non-payment of wages, overworked employees, passport retention, physical abuse, and instances of young workers dying from kidney diseases due to inadequate protections in working environments. The bodies of many deceased Bangladeshi domestic workers have been repatriated from the Middle East and other regions; however, the government tracks only registered migrants. A study reported that nearly all the deceased migrant workers had died of unnatural causes in destination countries, including Gulf states.

High recruitment fees and the economic marginalization of many Bangladeshi women result in female migrants incurring debts that increase vulnerability to coercion. Traffickers exploit Bangladeshi women and girls in forced labor and sex trafficking abroad, including in India, Pakistan, and Gulf countries. Female migrants seeking work as domestic workers reportedly experience significant risks of trafficking; traffickers exploit many of the hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi women working as domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. Some traffickers falsify identity documents to make children appear older than age 18 to send them abroad. Observers estimate that children constitute 40 percent of Bangladeshi sex trafficking victims exploited abroad. Traffickers have reportedly become increasingly sophisticated at deceiving the families of victims to delay filing of missing persons reports. Traffickers exploit male victims in forced labor abroad in construction and agriculture. Bangladeshi migrants increasingly report forced labor in cyber scam operations run by People's Republic of China (PRC) national-operated crime syndicates in third countries, including Cambodia.

In addition to international migration, rural populations migrate to urban areas in search of economic opportunities, and traffickers often exploit these prospective migrants both domestically and abroad. Traffickers use debt-based coercion to compel workers into labor, exploiting an initial debt assumed by a worker as part of the employment terms. Traffickers use coercive debts to force Bangladeshi families and Indian migrants to work in the shrimp and fish processing industries, aluminum, tea, garment factories, brick kilns, dry fish production, and shipbreaking. A study estimated that approximately 40,000 children are forced to work at dry fish processing units while their parents receive money advances against the children's salaries. Traffickers also target female-

led households in villages experiencing greater vulnerability after men migrate for work or women separate from their families. Female workers continued to face harassment and gender-based violence, including sexual violence, in the ready-made garment industry and other sectors. Bangladeshi children are at risk for forced labor in agriculture, brick kilns, domestic work, hospitality, and tanneries. One organization estimated more than 25,000 children work in deplorable conditions in the Keraniganj industrial district's garment factories, including many children who became indentured and serve as collateral for their parents' loans. Observers noted that domestic workers and construction workers lack adequate legal protection, resulting in the risk of exploitation. Traffickers force children younger than 14 years into domestic work, including through torture and restricting their movement. Most female child laborers are domestic workers who seldom appear in official child labor statistics; violent incidents were widespread yet underreported, with most cases settled privately. Traffickers coerce children experiencing homelessness into forced criminality or forced begging and sometimes sexually exploit them. Traffickers force children, especially in border areas, to produce and transport drugs, particularly a type of methamphetamine called *yaba*.

Traffickers continue to exploit adults and children from all regions of the country in Bangladesh's legal brothels, many illegal brothels, and private hotels. Traffickers use false promises of work to lure poor women and children into sex trafficking and fabricate exorbitant debts that women and girls as young as 10 must repay. Child sex trafficking remained widespread with an estimated 30,000 girls exploited in Bangladesh. Several women and girls reported traffickers preyed on them and sold them to brothels after the women fled abusive child marriages. Other women reported they had grown up in brothels because their mothers were engaged in commercial sex and brothel owners trafficked them as children. Observers report children growing up in Bangladesh's red-light districts seldom escape these brothels; approximately 20,000 children are growing up in Bangladeshi brothels where many are exploited in sex trafficking. Commercial sex is legal in registered brothels, and the individuals involved – including foreign nationals – must receive documentation from police confirming their age and consent; however, some police accept bribes to ignore abuse within the establishment, forego checking for required age documentation, and procure fraudulent documentation for children as young as 10 years old. Some traffickers force sex trafficking victims to become addicted to drugs and use addiction to maintain control. Children experiencing homelessness or using the streets as a source of livelihood in exchange for food, shelter, protection, and money often lack birth certificates or documentation and experience greater vulnerability to exploitation. Observers noted increasingly widespread job losses, wage cuts, and poverty in rural areas and urban slums due to the pandemic, which forces some children into begging and commercial sex. A study found that child sex trafficking victims are forced to take more clients at lower wages and experience more violence and sickness than adults voluntarily engaged in commercial sex.

Bangladesh hosts approximately one million Rohingya in refugee camps and host communities in Cox's Bazar near the Burmese border and in other parts of the country, more than 750,000 of whom arrived after August 2017. Traffickers exploit Rohingya men, women, and children from refugee camps in sex and labor trafficking both within Bangladesh and transnationally. Government restrictions on formal schooling and legal employment have contributed to Rohingya's vulnerability and led many Rohingya to migrate onward through irregular channels, thereby increasing risks of trafficking. Rohingya often lack sufficient access to formal criminal justice systems and social services when exploitation occurs. Traffickers transport Rohingya girls within Bangladesh and internationally to India, Malaysia, and Nepal for sex trafficking, sometimes using false promises of jobs or marriage; some traffickers "trade" these girls over the internet. Local criminal networks reportedly take Rohingya women from refugee camps to exploit in sex trafficking. Some Bangladeshi officials allegedly facilitate trafficking of Rohingya, including accepting bribes from traffickers to gain access to camps. Rohingya girls and boys are recruited from camps and forced to labor as shop hands, fishers, rickshaw pullers, and domestic workers. Some Rohingya men who fled to Bangladesh from Burma decades ago have been trapped in forced labor through debt-based coercion to Bangladeshi fishermen for years. Tourists increase demand for child sex tourism, including exploitation of Rohingya girls, near Cox's Bazar.

