

2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Honduras

HONDURAS (Tier 2)

The Government of Honduras 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; therefore Honduras remained on Tier 2. These efforts included prosecuting more suspected traffickers, identifying more victims, and increasing funding by four times to the Inter-institutional Commission to Combat Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking in Persons (CICESCT). The government increased staffing in its multidisciplinary Immediate Response Team (IRT) and opened CICESCT offices in four departments. The government enacted a new Strategic Action Plan against Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking in Persons 2023-2030 and published an annual report on its anti-trafficking efforts in 2023. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. Authorities investigated fewer suspects and convicted fewer traffickers. Criminal justice officials lacked specialized knowledge of trafficking crimes and frequently re-traumatized victims during criminal proceedings. Despite provisions in Honduran law directing courts to order convicted traffickers to pay victims compensation, authorities did not order any form of restitution or compensation to victims. Authorities made insufficient efforts to identify labor trafficking victims and provide them access to justice and protection.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS: ✓

Increase and institutionalize anti-trafficking training for police, prosecutors, judges, and CICESCT's IRT, with a focus on applying trauma-informed, victim-centered procedures and investigating and prosecuting forced labor. * Ensure convicted traffickers are ordered to pay compensation to victims, as called for in Honduran law. * Increase training for front-line officials on implementing SOPs for victim identification and referral, including screening for indicators of trafficking among migrants and returnees, forcibly displaced persons, children apprehended for illicit gang-related activities, and Cuban government-affiliated workers in Honduras. * Vigorously investigate and prosecute traffickers, including complicit officials and perpetrators of forced labor crimes, and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms. * Increase funding to NGO shelters, and expand access to services for male victims, and victims outside major cities. * Provide reintegration and livelihood support services for victims' long-term wellbeing and to prevent re-trafficking. * Amend the 2014 anti-trafficking law to include a definition of human trafficking consistent with international law. * Expand prevention measures, including raising awareness of fraudulent recruitment for employment in Honduras and abroad and punishing employers or employment agencies for illegal practices that facilitate trafficking, such as fraudulent offers of employment or illegal fees for migration or job placement. * Collaborate with local partners to increase culturally relevant outreach efforts in local languages targeted to rural, Indigenous, and Afro-Honduran communities that provide information and foster trust for at-risk individuals to seek assistance.

PROSECUTION ✓

The government maintained prosecution efforts; authorities prosecuted more suspected traffickers but investigated fewer suspects and convicted fewer traffickers. Amendments to Article 219 of the Honduran penal code, which took effect in November 2021, criminalized sex and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of 10 to 15 years' imprisonment. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape. However, the 2021 amendments included a definition of trafficking that was

inconsistent with the international law definition, as the law established the use of force, fraud, or coercion as aggravating factors rather than essential elements of the crime.

The government reported investigating 61 trafficking suspects, including 57 for sex trafficking and four for unspecified forms of trafficking. This was a decrease from 2022, when the government investigated 101 suspects in 89 cases (81 cases involving sex trafficking, three involving labor trafficking, and five involving unspecified forms of trafficking). Authorities initiated prosecutions of 48 suspects (42 for sex trafficking and six for labor trafficking) and continued prosecuting two suspected labor traffickers from cases initiated in previous years. This was an increase from 2022, when authorities initiated prosecutions of 30 suspects (27 for sex trafficking and related crimes, two for labor trafficking, and one for unspecified forms of trafficking). Authorities convicted 21 traffickers, including 18 sex traffickers and three for unspecified forms of trafficking, a decrease from 36 traffickers convicted in 2022 (including 32 sex traffickers and four labor traffickers). Some of these cases may have included crimes that did not constitute trafficking under the international law definition. The government did not report sentencing information for convicted traffickers. In comparison, courts issued prison sentences ranging from one year to 12 years and nine months for convicted traffickers and ordered some of them to also pay monetary fines to the government. The government reported investigating one police officer for alleged complicity in trafficking crimes but did not provide additional detail or specify whether this was a new or ongoing investigation. The government did not report any prosecutions or convictions of officials for alleged complicity in trafficking crimes. However, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained concerns, inhibiting law enforcement action during the year.

The government maintained a specialized prosecution unit responsible for investigating and prosecuting trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation, and migrant smuggling crimes. This unit included prosecutors and investigative police officers and had offices in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. However, experts observed police and prosecution units remained understaffed and lacked sufficient resources to effectively investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes, particularly outside major urban areas. NGOs noted courts continued to delay trafficking cases despite a requirement in the anti-trafficking law to process such cases in a timely manner. Experts observed that judges lacked specialized knowledge of human trafficking crimes, impeding successful prosecution and conviction of traffickers, and judges frequently re-traumatized victims, including by failing to recognize the complexity and severity of such crimes. Law enforcement authorities cooperated with United States counterparts on an unspecified number of cases involving both countries.

PROTECTION ✓

The government increased protection efforts. The government identified 95 victims, including 78 exploited in sex trafficking and 17 exploited in labor trafficking. This was a significant increase from 53 victims identified in 2022, including 46 exploited in sex trafficking and seven exploited in labor trafficking. Sex trafficking victims included 20 girls, 57 women, and one LGBTQI+ person whose age and gender were not reported, while labor trafficking victims included two girls, 13 boys, one woman, and one man. These data included two Honduran victims exploited in Guatemala and one Honduran victim exploited in Mexico. The government reported victims were identified or recruited in nine of Honduras' 18 departments.

First responders referred trafficking victims to CICESCT's IRT for immediate support. The IRT employed a multidisciplinary team that provided immediate care to victims and coordinated with relevant government institutions and NGOs to provide victims with comprehensive services including mental health counseling, legal services, medical care, lodging, food, family reintegration and immigration assistance. The government hired new IRT staff, expanding from five to 25 employees, including psychologists, social workers, and doctors. The government reported providing services to all 95 victims identified in 2023, and follow-up care to 115 victims identified in previous years. It did not provide details on the number of victims it assisted in 2022 for comparison.

CICESCT did not report the number of victims it referred to shelters in 2023. In comparison, it referred 13 sex trafficking victims (five girls, three boys, and five women) and two labor trafficking victims (one boy and one woman) to government and NGO shelters for additional care in 2022. The government referred some child victims to shelters operated by its child protection agency, renamed the Secretariat for Children, Adolescents, and Families. These shelters served children in need of protection but did not provide specialized services for trafficking victims. CICESCT also referred some victims to NGO shelters, including a shelter that served vulnerable children and child victims of crime and a shelter that served women victims of crimes, including trafficking. None of the shelters that assisted trafficking victims accepted men. At times, the government or NGOs arranged lodging in hotels for adult male victims. The government offered few services for victims in rural areas, and the quality of care for victims outside urban areas was inadequate.

The government implemented a victim assistance manual with SOPs for the proactive identification of victims among members of at-risk groups and interagency coordination procedures for referring victims to services. The victim assistance manual included procedures to screen for indicators of trafficking among underserved populations, including individuals with disabilities, indigenous and Afro-descendant persons, LGBTQI+ individuals, and persons forcibly displaced due to violence or environmental disasters. During the year, CICESCT updated its action protocol for the IRT team with support from an international organization. The government opened new CICESCT offices with permanent staff in the departments of Atlántida, Colón, Cortés, and Islas de la Bahía, including a new office based in the Garifuna community of Corozol, expanding access to services for members of this at-risk community. Some of CICESCT's 24 local committees, comprised of local officials, implemented localized action protocols for victim identification and assistance in their respective municipalities, and during the year CICESCT supported four municipalities to develop these tools. Local experts reported the government made insufficient efforts to identify labor trafficking victims, including victims exploited in forced criminality and forced begging. The government did not screen Cuban government-affiliated nationals working in Honduras for trafficking indicators, despite concerns the Cuban government may have forced some of them to work. The government followed a regional protocol to facilitate the repatriation of Honduran victims identified abroad and collaborated with an international organization that provided food, clothing, and transportation to repatriate two Honduran victims exploited in Guatemala.

The government allocated 30.31 million lempiras (\$1.23 million) to CICESCT in 2023, more than four times the amount it allocated in 2022 (7.13 million lempiras or \$289,550). In addition, the government allocated two vehicles, acquired as seized assets, to CICESCT's IRT. In November 2023, the government approved a Fund for the Care of Victims of Human Trafficking and Related Activities, with plans to allocate 5 million lempiras (\$203,050) to provide direct support to victims, though the fund did not become operational. Despite the significant budget increase, the government did not report whether it provided funding to NGOs that provide shelter or other services to trafficking victims. In comparison, CICESCT provided 150,000 lempiras (\$6,090) in funding to an NGO shelter in 2022.

The government provided victim-witness assistance services to some victims participating in investigations or prosecutions. Authorities permitted victims to provide testimony through written statements or pre-recorded interviews in one of its four secure Gesell chambers. IRT members accompanied victims throughout their participation in the criminal justice process and referred some victims to legal aid services for additional assistance. Provisions in Honduran law directed courts to order convicted traffickers to pay victims compensation, but authorities did not order any form of restitution or compensation to victims. NGOs reported the government did not adequately train prosecutors to file such claims on behalf of victims. NGOs also reported Gesell chambers were unavailable outside large cities and officials in rural areas often used harsh questioning that re-traumatized some victims, especially children. The slow pace of legal proceedings, and insufficient protections tailored to child victims participating in the criminal justice process, further limited access to justice for child victims. Honduran law prohibited the prosecution of victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. The government reported officials screened for trafficking indicators when detaining undocumented migrants or other vulnerable persons. However, the government lacked formal procedures for identifying victims among children apprehended for gang-related criminal activity; as a result, authorities may have detained and

arrested some unidentified trafficking victims. NGOs reported authorities did not properly identify some children forced to engage in illegal activities by criminal groups, reporting the government may have inappropriately treated such children as criminals instead of victims. Honduran law allowed foreign victims to receive temporary or permanent residency status, including authorization to work, although the government did not report providing any foreign victims with this status in 2023.

PREVENTION ✓

The government increased prevention efforts, enacting a new strategic action plan and improving data collection and reporting efforts. The CICESCT secretariat convened a network of government agencies and NGOs responsible for coordinating anti-trafficking efforts, advancing policy, and monitoring and evaluating efforts. The CICESCT board of directors met monthly and provided support to 24 local interinstitutional committees across each of Honduras' 18 departments. The government reported it enacted and began implementing a new Strategic Action Plan against Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking in Persons 2023-2030, but it did not make this plan public. CICESCT published an annual report on its anti-trafficking efforts in 2023. CICESCT conducted training and information events on trafficking prevention for civil society stakeholders, members of the media, and public officials including police, prosecutors, judges, immigration officials, child protections specialists, and local leaders. CICESCT implemented three informational campaigns through traditional and social media to raise awareness of trafficking risks among members of the public and conducted training and awareness events tailored for children and students in educational settings. The government made campaign materials available in Honduran Sign Language and coordinated an event with representatives of the deaf community to discuss anti-trafficking prevention among persons with disabilities. However, greater efforts were needed to translate materials into Indigenous languages.

CICESCT maintained a public website and social media accounts to share information on human trafficking with the public and encourage reporting of suspected trafficking crimes. CICESCT operated a trafficking-specific hotline, and the anti-trafficking prosecution unit managed an email account for trafficking complaints. An NGO in Atlántida department also operated a hotline. The government did not report whether any victims included in its statistics were identified through calls or emails through these channels.

The Honduran government contracted Cuban government-affiliated workers, including teachers and medical professionals, and in February 2024 it signed a new agreement with the Cuban government to contract an additional 120 medical professionals. Authorities did not report efforts to prevent forced labor among these workers, despite ongoing concerns by international experts that the Government of Cuba may have compelled some of them work. Labor inspectors did not report identifying any suspected trafficking cases in 2023. Honduran regulations prohibited charging recruitment fees to workers. The Secretariat of Labor and Social Security monitored compliance with labor laws and policies that could decrease workers' vulnerability to trafficking, including those regulating private employment agencies, recruitment and contracting of Honduran workers abroad, and employment of at-risk groups, such as domestic workers and seafarers. However, the government did not report efforts to hold employers or employment agencies accountable for unlawful practices that facilitated trafficking in 2023. CICESCT and the Honduran Tourism Institute continued to coordinate with their regional counterparts to conduct an awareness raising campaign aimed at the prevention of extraterritorial commercial child sexual exploitation and abuse. The government did not report efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE: ✓

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Honduras, and traffickers exploit victims from Honduras abroad. Traffickers exploit Honduran women and children in sex trafficking within the country and in other countries such as Belize, El

Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Spain, and the United States. Traffickers particularly target LGBTQI+ Hondurans, migrants and asylum-seekers, Indigenous and Afro-descendant Hondurans, IDPs, persons with disabilities, children in child labor, children whose parents have migrated, and individuals living in areas controlled by organized criminal groups. Officials report the COVID-19 pandemic worsened numerous issues that exacerbate these risks, such as family problems, unemployment, and lack of access to health care. Traffickers exploit victims within their own homes or communities, including their own family members or friends. Traffickers exploit Honduran adults and children within the country in forced labor in street vending, forced begging, domestic service, drug trafficking, and the informal sector. Traffickers also exploit Honduran victims in forced labor in other countries, particularly Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States. Children, including those from Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, particularly Miskito boys, are at risk of forced labor in the agricultural, construction, manufacturing, mining, and hospitality industries. Children experiencing homelessness are at risk of sex and labor trafficking. Criminal organizations, including gangs, exploit girls in sex trafficking, force children into street begging, and coerce and threaten children and young adults to transport weapons, sell drugs, commit extortion, or serve as lookouts; these acts occur primarily in urban areas, but one NGO reported an increase in gang activity in rural areas. Criminals increasingly use social network platforms to recruit victims, often through fake advertisements and false promises of employment or deceptive romantic relationships, and continue to target vulnerable populations. Government-affiliated Cuban workers in Honduras, including at least 120 medical professionals and 123 teachers may have been forced to work by the Cuban government. Men from Canada and the United States exploit Honduran children in extraterritorial commercial child sexual exploitation and abuse. Migrants and asylum seekers from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Central America, the Middle East, and South America who transit Honduras en route to the United States are vulnerable to trafficking. Corruption and official complicity help facilitate trafficking crimes.