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2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka (Tier 2)

The Government of Sri Lanka 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 on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Sri Lanka was upgraded to Tier 2. These efforts included slightly increasing investigations, including of several Sri Lankan officials allegedly involved in child trafficking, and establishing a specialized unit to strengthen trafficking investigations. The government identified more victims, including among migrant workers exploited abroad. The government also increased coordination among agencies to further implementation of the 2021-2025 national action plan (NAP). The government expanded its trafficking hotline services to include online support for referrals. In addition, the government secured a new shelter location to accommodate victims of crime, including trafficking victims. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government prosecuted fewer trafficking cases, and sentences for convicted traffickers remained inadequate. Law enforcement efforts against labor trafficking were disproportionately low compared with the number of identified labor trafficking victims. The capacity of local officials to identify trafficking victims remained low, especially among women in commercial sex. The government did not effectively address vulnerabilities to trafficking faced by migrant workers, including high worker-paid recruitment fees, largely unregulated sub-agents, and policies and procedures that undermined safe and legal migration.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Improve efforts to vigorously investigate and prosecute suspected traffickers, including labor traffickers and isolated reports of officials allegedly complicit in trafficking, and adequately sentence convicted traffickers.
- Increase efforts to proactively identify trafficking victims, including among undocumented migrant workers abroad and women in commercial sex.
- Ensure victims are not penalized for unlawful acts traffickers compel them to commit, including through increased training of law enforcement and the judiciary.
- Provide support to victims who participate in trials against their traffickers, including the cost of lodging and travel expenses during trials.
- Use Section 360C of the penal code to prosecute child sex traffickers.
- Improve victim services, including their quality and accessibility, and ensure shelter and specialized services are available for all identified victims, including men and victims exploited abroad.
- Increase regular monitoring of licensed recruitment agencies and refer allegations of criminal violations to law enforcement.
- Vigorously improve efforts to address child sex tourism, including proactive identification of victims, engagement with hotels and tourism operators, and investigation of establishments and intermediaries who allegedly facilitate the crime.
- Eliminate all recruitment fees charged by labor recruiters to workers.
- Expand the foreign employment bureau's mandate to include regulation of sub-agents.
- Promote safe and legal migration, ensure migration regulations do not discriminate based on gender, and increase awareness among prospective migrants of the steps necessary for safe migration and resources available abroad.
- Through the anti-trafficking task force, continue to institutionalize sustained government coordination efforts.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. Section 360C of the penal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of two to 20 years' imprisonment and a fine, which were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other serious offenses, such as rape. The government also used other sections of the penal code to investigate and prosecute sex trafficking crimes. Section 360B criminalized offenses relating to the sexual exploitation of children and prescribed penalties of five to 20 years' imprisonment and a fine. Additionally, Section 360A criminalized offenses relating to procurement and prescribed penalties of two to 10 years' imprisonment and fines, significantly lower than those available under the trafficking provision.

The Criminal Investigation Department's (CID) anti-trafficking unit and police initiated 16 trafficking investigations (13 sex trafficking, two forced labor, and one unspecified case), compared with 14 investigations (six sex trafficking and eight forced labor cases) during the previous reporting period. The government initiated 16 prosecutions, including 13 for sex trafficking (five under procurement, 360A; five under the sexual exploitation of children statutes, 360B; and three under the trafficking statute, 360C) and three for labor trafficking (all under Section 360C), compared with 27 prosecutions (16 under the procurement statute) during the previous reporting period. The courts also issued three indictments against four accused traffickers under Section 360C. The Attorney General's Department (AGD) reported 96 trafficking cases from previous reporting periods, including 95 sex trafficking cases (four under trafficking, 79 under procurement, and 12 under sexual exploitation of children statutes) and one labor trafficking case remained pending prosecution. The government convicted three sex traffickers under Section 360A, the procurement statute, compared with the conviction of three traffickers for procurement and acquittals in three cases during the previous reporting period. Courts sentenced the three traffickers to pay a fine or face three months' imprisonment compared to sentencing two traffickers to two years' imprisonment and suspending one trafficker's sentence during the previous period. By issuing lenient sentences to convicted traffickers, courts created potential safety problems for trafficking victims and weakened deterrence. Due to the pandemic, government offices and courts closed for an extended period, and some offices were not fully functional due to pandemic-related lockdown and health guidelines, which hindered law enforcement efforts. Despite these limitations, the National Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force (NAHTTF) used online platforms to continue investigations and prosecutions. Additionally, the National Child Protection Agency (NCPA) referred 86 cases of possible child sexual exploitation, including potential trafficking, to police. The government established a new Human Trafficking, Smuggling Investigation and Maritime Crimes Investigation Division within the CID to investigate and combat human trafficking crimes; the new division is reportedly more accessible and accommodating for potential victims to report complaints.

Prosecutors' reliance on victim testimony, difficulty securing evidence from victims, and judges' issuance of suspended sentences contributed to both the government's general reliance on procurement charges and the lenient sentences applied under Section 360A. Prosecutors could pursue procurement cases without the cooperation of the victim. However, lengthy trials—a problem endemic throughout the criminal justice system—and stigma faced by victims deterred many from participating in trials. Most Sri Lankan diplomatic missions did not refer witness and victim affidavits from abroad to CID for investigation, although one mission referred a case involving unclear indicators of labor exploitation to the Inspector General of Police. The government allocated 1.1 million Sri Lankan Rupees (LKR) (\$5,430) to the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment's (SLBFE) Counter Human Trafficking Unit, compared with 6.1 million LKR (\$30,090) allocated to the unit in the previous year, largely due to the reduced number of migrant workers. The government trained ministry officials on anti-trafficking laws, trafficking investigations, and prosecutions. Police continued to conduct anti-trafficking training for new recruits. NCPA began to train its staff on child trafficking using a tri-lingual training manual for law enforcement and child protection officers developed in collaboration with an NGO and an academic institution. Members of the NAHTTF—including the Department of Labor, Ministry of Justice, Bureau for the Prevention of Abuse of Children and Women, and other ministries—conducted numerous anti-trafficking trainings for officials and civil society members. In response to increasing use of fake social media accounts and online platforms to fraudulently recruit victims, the NAHTTF provided training to the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission. The government also implemented a special case system that prioritized child abuse and human trafficking cases when scheduling hearing dates. The Department of Immigration and Emigration's Border Surveillance Unit finalized standard operating procedures (SOPs) to increase identification of trafficking cases; immigration officers identified 46 violations of human trafficking, migrant smuggling, and irregular migration using the procedures at designated ports.

Concerns about official complicity persisted, and the government did not make sufficient efforts to investigate all allegations or report any prosecutions or convictions of allegedly complicit officials. The government maintained a telephone hotline and online platform for public reporting of complaints directly to the Inspector General of Police. In July 2021, authorities arrested a local divisional council member, two police officers, and one Naval officer in a child sex trafficking case. The court released the four officials on bail, and the case remained pending at the end of the

reporting period. In the previous reporting period, the government investigated allegations of sexual exploitation of children at a state-run orphanage and found no elements of sex trafficking during the investigation; however, in June and November, officials referred the 19 cases to the Attorney General on sexual abuse charges, which remained ongoing by the end of the reporting period. The government did not report efforts to investigate past allegations that some male and female Sri Lankan trafficking victims who fled abusive employers overseas and sought refuge at Sri Lankan embassies reported certain Sri Lankan consular officers sent female trafficking victims back to their exploitative employers and “sold” other women back to their exploitative employment agencies or new employers for financial gain. The same organization noted that embassy staff were able to facilitate new contracts for workers overseas upon consent of the worker and new employer, provided there were no other restrictions, which further contributed to perceptions of complicity between employers and embassies—especially when workers were exploited or otherwise dissatisfied with the new workplace. According to a July 2019 international organization report, some migrant workers bribed officials to obtain fraudulent “family background reports” and pre-departure training certificates required for legal migration.

PROTECTION

The government slightly increased protection efforts. The government identified 28 female victims and no male victims, compared with 20 victims identified during the previous reporting period. Of the 28 victims, traffickers exploited 14 in sex trafficking, 13 in labor trafficking, and one for unspecified exploitation. The government referred 27 victims to government agencies and an international organization for services, including shelter, psycho-social care, and educational services, and collaborated with an NGO to support the repatriation of one individual to Uzbekistan. The SLBFE referred two Sri Lankan trafficking victims in the United Arab Emirates and one victim in Kuwait to the CID for assistance. Civil society organizations reported an increase in government agencies identifying and referring more trafficking victims for care.

The government had SOPs for the identification and referral of potential victims to services, and the government endorsed SOPs for the identification, protection, and referral of child trafficking victims in 2021. Victim identification procedures included step-by-step guidelines for short-term assistance available to all victims of trafficking. However, the government reportedly did not implement the SOPs uniformly; both government representatives and members of civil society stated the capacity of local officials to identify trafficking victims remained low, especially among women in commercial sex. Officials and NGOs on occasion did not identify forced labor and sex trafficking that did not involve transnational movement, especially of children, and categorized those cases as other crimes. The government partnered with an international organization to establish anti-trafficking forums in seven districts that served to convene local government officials with the community to enhance collaboration on anti-trafficking efforts and increase victim identification. NAHTTF members screened some migrants and other at-risk groups for indicators of trafficking and referred cases to police and CID for further investigation or support services.

The government provided 12.44 million LKR (\$61,360) in assistance to the State Ministry of Women and Child Development to operate a shelter for female victims of domestic violence and trafficking. However, a magistrate’s order is required for victims to receive services at the shelter, which trafficking victims who did not seek assistance from law enforcement could not access. No government shelter could accommodate adult male victims, although the government stated it could provide shelter for male victims, if needed; the government did not identify any male victims during the reporting period. The National Authority for the Protection of Victims of Crime and Witnesses secured a site for a new government shelter to support victims of crime, including trafficking victims, and continued work with civil society to develop operational guidelines. The government reported it did not provide shelter services to the identified victims. The government partnered with international organizations to provide medical, psycho-social, legal, and reintegration support to victims with court orders, regardless of their decision to cooperate with law enforcement. NCPA conducted routine monitoring of 369 childcare institutions using a new digital platform during the reporting period, given previous reports that shelter workers and older residents in some government- and privately-run homes sexually exploited child residents, possibly including trafficking victims. The Department of Probation and Child Care Services provided access to computers, textbooks, and school tutoring to two child trafficking victims during the reporting period. The government cooperated with foreign governments, including providing support for five female Indonesian victims of sex trafficking.

Civil society noted that, at the local level, a lack of capacity and sensitization among police, immigration officials, and judges remained an impediment to proper screening for trafficking victims. Additionally, lack of awareness and misunderstanding led some local authorities to penalize sex trafficking victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of trafficking, including officials arresting or detaining sex trafficking victims without proper screening. Some trafficking victims did not participate in the law enforcement process due to financial constraints and requirements that victim-witnesses travel to courts; however, the Victim Protection Act of 2015 entitled victims to financial support to testify or appear in court, and the government reported it provided some

assistance, including food, accommodation, and transportation to victims. The 2015 SOP on the identification, protection, and referral of victims stated that foreign trafficking victims who do not cooperate with a criminal complaint can receive repatriation assistance and support services if a court order is granted. Law enforcement reported many victims were reluctant to pursue cases against their alleged traffickers due to the social stigma attached with trafficking. While Sri Lankan law has established a victim and witness compensation fund, the government did not provide any funding to trafficking victims during the reporting period. The government allowed victims to transfer court houses, provided transportation for court cases, and offered relocation services during pending trials. The NAHTTF coordinated trafficking victim interviews to reduce the need for repetitive testimony and reduce re-traumatization, and the government began allowing testimony through audio and video links in certain cases. When authorities officially identified foreign victims of trafficking, the victims had the same access as Sri Lankan citizens to services. Foreign victims who cooperated in prosecutions could receive a visa extension until the end of the trial, although the government did not report issuing visa extensions during the reporting period. Sri Lankan law did not provide foreign victims with legal alternatives to deportation to countries where they might face hardship or retribution after trial completion or for victims who did not cooperate in the prosecution of traffickers.

SLBFE operated short-term shelters and safe houses at Sri Lankan diplomatic missions in 10 countries for migrant workers in distress. However, the government reduced the number of labor attachés serving in Sri Lankan embassies and at the SLBFE, due to budget shortfalls related to the pandemic response, reduced human and financial resources previously available for assistance and protection of migrant workers abroad. During the reporting period, Sri Lankan missions abroad assisted 226 migrant workers with shelter, including potential trafficking victims. According to an international organization, when carrying out screening and despite their training, some labor attachés often did not know what questions to ask migrant workers, what evidence to look for, or whom to contact in other agencies to refer potential cases. Sri Lankan diplomatic missions continued to provide funding and logistical support to international organizations that repatriated Sri Lankan migrant workers exploited abroad. Officials did not consistently screen migrant workers who traveled abroad without documentation or who possessed expired work permits for indicators of trafficking, raising concerns some officials might be conflating human trafficking with migrant smuggling. However, the government continued training officials to improve victim identification. In one instance, the Department of Immigration and Emigration screened two potential Thai victims of trafficking and referred the case to CID for further investigation upon identifying elements of exploitation. Embassy shelters could only accommodate females, so it was unclear where exploited male migrant workers stayed before repatriation. Some migrant workers at the shelters reported poor conditions, including inadequate food, unsanitary living conditions, and insufficient legal assistance. Only Sri Lankan workers who had registered with SLBFE prior to departure could access legal assistance from Sri Lankan embassies, including assistance securing back wages from employers. However, due to the pandemic, SLBFE made resources from the Worker's Welfare Fund, including legal services, medical care, accommodation, and food, available to migrant workers regardless of their registration status. Although SLBFE maintained district-level offices, it usually required repatriated migrant workers to visit the main office in Colombo to launch an investigation into recruitment and labor violations, including trafficking, which many of the indebted and daily wage workers could not afford. As a result, trafficking victims continued to withdraw complaints or not come forward. Some officials at SLBFE reported in 2019 that, contrary to the SOPs, they only referred potential trafficking victims to services after initiating a police investigation.

SLBFE continued to operate a transit shelter near the Colombo airport, primarily for returned migrant workers who suffered abuse abroad. During the reporting period, the SLBFE airport unit reported providing 200 migrants with food, accommodation, and bus fare, although it did not report identifying any trafficking victims among those assisted. As in previous years, the lack of government identification of trafficking victims contrasted with the number of complaints from workers abroad. In 2018, the most recent year for which such data was available, 3,809 Sri Lankan migrant workers in more than 19 countries reported labor-related complaints to SLBFE, including with indicators of trafficking. The vast majority of complainants were females in domestic work in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates; male migrant workers in Saudi Arabia also reported many labor violations.

PREVENTION

The government slightly increased its prevention efforts. The NAHTTF continued to meet regularly under the new leadership of the Ministry of Defense and worked to increase coordination among government and civil society organizations to implement the 2021-2025 NAP. The NAHTTF organized its efforts by prosecution, protection, prevention, and partnership functions with designated ministry points of contact. The government trained thousands of ministry officials—including the SLBFE, Department of Immigration and Emigration, National Authority for the Protection of Victims of Crimes and Witnesses, CID, Ministry of Justice, Bureau for the Prevention of Abuse of Children and Women of the Police, Department of Labor (DOL), NCPA, Attorney General's department, and the

foreign ministry—on victim identification, victims assistance, and anti-trafficking laws. The government, in coordination with an international organization, conducted awareness campaigns through billboards and radio, television, and social media programs. The campaigns targeted potential victims, prospective migrant workers, and first responders, as well as the general public; the Ministry of Justice also conducted an awareness campaign that incorporated the input of trafficking survivors. In addition, SLBFE conducted awareness raising programs for prospective migrant workers within Sri Lanka and at some embassies abroad, particularly in the Middle East. The government also completed an assessment on the outcomes of awareness programs, and SLBFE began to update pre-departure training programs for prospective migrant workers. In addition, the State Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Market Diversification (SMFEMD) conducted more than 200 awareness programs for aspiring migrant workers and communities across Sri Lanka.

DOL conducted information campaigns on eliminating child and hazardous forms of labor, including child forced labor, and held more than 100 awareness programs targeting fishing communities. DOL conducted 64 enforcement operations at 318 establishments in an effort to disrupt forced labor supply chains. In 2021, DOL conducted 38,280 labor inspections, received 204 child labor complaints, concluded 178 child labor investigations, and imposed penalties for child labor violations in one case. Labor inspectors, who received training on trafficking during the reporting period, identified three incidents of child labor—including cases in the construction, domestic work, and service sectors—out of six cases investigated in 2021; however, inspectors did not report identifying any suspected trafficking cases. In addition, the government removed one child in a case of hazardous child labor in the forestry sector. Labor inspectors only had the authority to inspect private residences for violations against child domestic workers if a complaint was received. Additionally, pandemic-related movement restrictions adversely impacted the ability of DOL to conduct inspections and collect evidence regarding complaints and led to a brief suspension of routine inspections, although child labor inspections continued.

A ban on migration remained in place for male and female domestic workers younger than 21 and 25 years, respectively, to Saudi Arabia, and male and female domestic workers younger than 18 and 23 years, respectively, to other parts of the Middle East. SLBFE also required all female migrant workers younger than 45 to submit a “family background report” to ensure they did not have children younger than 5 years old and obtained either a spousal or guardian’s consent to work abroad; authorities did not require spousal or guardian consent for male migrant workers. Observers reported the ban on migration continued to leave Sri Lankans with no legal means to travel abroad for work and therefore without access to protection mechanisms available through authorized travel, subsequently increasing their vulnerability to human trafficking. Agencies and individual sponsors were also required to obtain a “No Objection Certificate” (NOC) from the Sri Lankan embassy for any female domestic worker migrating to Oman; this also required the worker to register with SLBFE. According to this procedure, the Oman Police only issued employment visas to Sri Lankan female domestic workers who submitted both the NOC and an employment contract. All licensed foreign employment agencies were required to submit a semi-annual report confirming the whereabouts of female domestic migrant workers in an effort to mitigate the risk of exploitation while abroad; however, the government did not provide any information by the end of the reporting period.

The government did not make efforts to eliminate legal fees recruitment agencies are allowed to charge migrant workers, which increased workers’ vulnerability to trafficking. SLBFE reported monitoring the costs charged to migrant workers, although fees varied by destination country, employer, and job category. SLBFE required each migrant worker to pay a registration fee equivalent to more than one month’s salary that required renewal every two years. Additionally, an international report published in 2019 noted some workers reported recruitment agencies charged an additional 8,000 to 150,000 LKR (\$39-\$740). Some officials reported SLBFE’s lack of close monitoring enabled agencies to charge fees in excess of the legal amounts; some workers paid as much as 1 million LKR (\$4,930) for the entire recruitment process, including fees charged by illegal sub-agents. However, SLBFE reported that no recruitment fees are charged for the domestic work sector in Middle Eastern countries and professional categories in which employers bear recruitment costs. SLBFE’s unit at the main international airport in Colombo detected migrant workers who attempt to leave the country for employment abroad without proper registration; from March 1 to October 30, 2021, the unit detected 2,632 individuals who attempted to go abroad for employment using tourist visas. According to observers, during the pandemic, the government limited outward migration and only permitted migration to a few countries involving a few licensed agents. For those Sri Lankan migrant workers overseas, the government negotiated with immigration authorities to waive penalties and other violations of immigration laws caused by the pandemic, facilitated free legal service, and secured general amnesty for migrant workers out of immigration status.

SLBFE maintained an online system for registering and responding to migrant worker complaints. Civil society and exploited migrant workers abroad continued to report cases of exploitative labor to SLBFE, including non-payment of wages, contract fraud, and document retention. SLBFE officers in the conciliation division do not always recognize elements of trafficking and may handle cases administratively, rather than referring the case to police. During the reporting period, SLBFE

cancelled the licenses of six recruitment agencies and took action in 35 cases against malpractice and irregularities in the labor recruitment process. This compared with 30 cases and the suspension of three foreign recruitment agencies for illegal practices in the previous reporting period. SLBFE Act Section 62 states that operating a recruitment agency without a valid license is an offense punishable with four years' imprisonment and a fine. Although the government reported that a legislative framework to address sub-agents existed, SLBFE did not have the legal authority to regulate sub-agents, which officials recognized contributed to trafficking. The government continued to seek approval for an amendment to the Foreign Employment Act to address the oversight of sub-agents and the investigative authority of MFE officials, including SLBFE.

The government did not report efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex. NCPA continued awareness campaigns targeted to parents and children on child abuse, including child sex tourism, in Sri Lanka's Coastal Belt. The government did not report efforts to reduce the demand for child sex tourism, although the government worked with civil society and an international organization to research causes of sex tourism in Sri Lanka. Foreign tourism has remained low since 2020. The NCPA continued to run a hotline to report child abuse and expanded its services to include online support for referrals via email and text messages. The hotline received 79 reports of alleged child trafficking from April to October 2021, with police investigating the referrals. SLBFE conducted anti-trafficking trainings for personnel at 16 diplomatic missions, and the Foreign Ministry held anti-trafficking trainings in missions facilitating significant labor migration. The government continued to provide anti- trafficking training to its troops prior to their deployment as peacekeepers.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Sri Lanka, and traffickers exploit victims from Sri Lanka abroad. The majority of Sri Lankan trafficking cases involve traffickers forcing Sri Lankan migrant workers into labor overseas. Traffickers exploit Sri Lankan men, women, and children in forced labor in the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and the United States in the construction, garment, and domestic service sectors. Approximately 1.5 million Sri Lankans work in the Middle East, predominately in construction and domestic work, as well as in professional services. The majority of Sri Lankan female migrant workers seek employment in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Japan, and South Korea, and authorities have identified labor trafficking victims among these workers. Over the past five years, thousands of Sri Lankan female migrant workers—especially from Nuwara Eliya, Ampara, and Batticaloa—reported employers exploited them in forced labor in domestic work in the Gulf. Before leaving Sri Lanka, many migrant workers accumulate debt to pay high recruitment fees imposed by unscrupulous labor recruitment agencies—most of them members of Sri Lanka's association of licensed foreign employment agencies—and their unlicensed sub-agents. For labor trafficking in domestic work, some traffickers target Sri Lankan women with existing debts and use promises of a large advance to defraud them into accepting positions. Some Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Gulf report employers retained their identity documents, including passports and work permits, which restricts freedom of movement and is a common means of coercion for labor and sex trafficking. Some recruitment agencies commit fraud by changing the agreed upon job, employer, conditions, or salary after the worker's arrival. Some recruitment agencies lure workers with promises of work abroad but send them with fraudulent or incorrect documents—including tourist visas instead of work visas—so victims are subject to penalization, including jail time and deportation, if they seek assistance abroad. An international organization reported in 2019 that sub-agents colluded with officials to procure fake or falsified travel documents to facilitate travel of Sri Lankans abroad. According to 2018 media reporting, at least six government-licensed recruitment agencies in Sri Lanka admitted that, if prospective Middle Eastern employers request, they force female migrant workers to take contraceptives before departure to provide a "three-month guarantee" maids will not become pregnant after arrival. Per the same 2018 reporting, sources alleged this was also used to cover up sexual exploitation by recruitment agents and employers, including sex trafficking. Traffickers have forced Sri Lankan women into commercial sex in South and Southeast Asian countries, among other countries. During the reporting period, traffickers increased their use of social media to fraudulently recruit victims due to pandemic-related restrictions in mobility. Sri Lanka is a transit point for Nepali women subjected to forced labor in the Middle East.

Within Sri Lanka, traffickers exploit men, women, and children in forced labor and sex trafficking, although women, children, ethnic minorities, and older individuals are often most at risk. Ethnic minorities such as the Malayaha Tamils, whose ancestors migrated from India to work on plantations, continue to experience marginalization and forms of discrimination that heighten vulnerability to trafficking. Traffickers recruit women from rural areas with promises of urban jobs in the hospitality sector, salons, spas, and domestic work but exploit some in forced labor or commercial sex. Due to the pandemic, observers report increasingly unethical labor recruitment practices within the local labor market, especially targeting women, as illegal sub-agent recruiters shift their focus from overseas jobs. The socio-economic impact of the pandemic and related restrictions have contributed to an increase in cybersex crimes and increased the risk of low-income

individuals and other vulnerable groups to sex trafficking. One local NGO estimated that cybersex crimes, including sex trafficking, against women and children have increased as much as 300 percent since the onset of the pandemic.

Additionally, observers stated they believe more young women were engaged in commercial sex due to pandemic-related economic hardships. Traffickers reportedly exploit boys and girls in sex trafficking, including in coastal areas for child sex tourism, and in hotels, on beaches, and during annual festivals, though tourism volumes fell substantially due to the pandemic. One report found that many child trafficking victims traveled to coastal tourist locations from Anuradhapura district. Reports allege some hotels allow clients to book “services” with children for child sex tourism, and some hotels use intermediaries to provide their guests with males and females—including children—for commercial sex. In addition to foreign tourists—including from Germany, Russia, India, and the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—researchers report significant local demand driving child sex trafficking in country. In recent years, traffickers have subjected women from other Asian countries to sex trafficking in Sri Lanka. Traffickers may have exploited migrant workers brought to Sri Lanka on tourist visas and foreign women in commercial sex in Sri Lanka. In addition, some micro-finance companies targeted women with predatory loans and contracts written in English, resulting in debts that forced women to resort to commercial sex or subject their children to sex trafficking in order to pay off the debt.

Some observers have long reported that some local government and security sector officials forced women who asked for information about their missing husbands or widows who attempted to claim government benefits from their deceased husbands’ military service, to perform commercial sex acts in exchange for information and/or government benefits. Officials and NGOs reported some workers and residents in government and private shelters that care for trafficking victims sexually abused and exploited some of the institutionalized children.

Sri Lankan children work in the domestic sector, service industry, and more hazardous occupations, such as the industrial sector. Child labor is also significant among ethnic minority Tamils on tea and rubber plantations. Some children and women domestic workers in Colombo are subjected to physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, non-payment of wages, and restrictions of movement—indicators of labor trafficking. Labor traffickers exploit children in small boutiques and informal markets. Traffickers reportedly exploited children as part of the drug trade in prior years.

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