

2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cyprus

Cyprus (Tier 2)

The Government of the Republic of Cyprus fully meets the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. The government made key achievements to do so during the reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on its anti-trafficking capacity therefore Cyprus was upgraded to Tier 1. These achievements included convicting traffickers for the first time in three years. The government hired additional social workers and created a new Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare Services (SWS), which will help coordinate and strengthen victim protection. The Minister of Justice signed an MOU with the new Deputy Minister of Social Welfare to streamline cooperation between the Anti-Trafficking Unit (ATU) and SWS officers on the national referral mechanism (NRM). Civil society reported the implementation of the NRM improved and the service quality at the government-run shelter was appropriate. The government arranged for foreign national victims to return to Cyprus to testify and paid accommodation and travel expenses for family members to support a victim during the trial. The government launched an anti-trafficking hotline and formed a sub-committee on creating awareness campaigns on demand reduction for commercial sex. Although the government meets the minimum standards, it prosecuted fewer suspects and identified fewer victims. Judges issued suspended sentences or a fine to half of the convicted traffickers, which was not equal to the seriousness of the crime, undercut efforts to hold traffickers accountable, and weakened deterrence. SWS continued to not respond to referrals of some potential victims in a timely manner and failed to refer all potential victims to police for official identification procedures.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Vigorously investigate, prosecute, and convict traffickers under Law 60(I), including complicit officials.
- Sentence convicted traffickers to prison terms consistent with prescribed penalties and train judges at all levels of the judiciary to take the severity of trafficking into account when issuing sentences.
- Allocate sufficient resources to enable police to effectively investigate all offenses and SWS to refer all potential victims in a timely manner.
- Reduce delays in providing victim assistance, including access to health care, rental disbursements, and financial assistance.
- Increase training for government personnel, particularly SWS officials, on victim identification, assistance, and referral.
- Proactively identify victims among vulnerable populations, including migrants, asylum seekers, and agricultural workers.
- Reduce delays in court proceedings.
- Strengthen the capacity of the Labor Inspectorate to identify and refer victims of forced labor.
- Improve victim-centered investigations and prosecutions and implement witness protection measures when necessary.
- Implement recommendations made by the Ombudsman and other entities that monitor and evaluate anti-trafficking policies and efforts.
- Train judges on restitution in criminal cases, establish procedures to seize assets from traffickers, and create effective methods to allocate restitution in a timely manner.
- Inform all identified victims of their right to pursue compensation and encourage them to do so.

PROSECUTION

The government increased prosecution efforts. Laws 117(I)/2019 and 60(I)/2014 criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties up to 25 years' imprisonment for offenses involving an adult victim and up to life imprisonment for offenses involving a child victim. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with regard to sex trafficking, commensurate with those for serious crimes, such as rape. Police investigated 22 suspects in 11 cases, compared with 18 suspects in seven cases in 2020; 11 suspects were investigated for sex trafficking, seven for forced criminality, and four for forced labor. The government prosecuted 21 defendants in 12 new cases in 2021, compared with 23 defendants in 2020; 14 defendants were prosecuted for sex trafficking, four for forced labor, and three for forced criminality. The government continued to prosecute 71 defendants in 26 cases, compared with 86 defendants in 27 cases. The government convicted 10 traffickers under the trafficking law, four for sex trafficking and six for forced labor; these were the first trafficking convictions in four years. Judges sentenced one trafficker to eight years' imprisonment, two traffickers to two years' imprisonment, and two traffickers to one year and eight months' imprisonment. However, judges sentenced four traffickers with only a three-year suspended sentence and one trafficker with a fine of €14,950 (\$16,950). Such lenient sentences undercut efforts to hold traffickers accountable, weakened deterrence, created potential security and safety concerns for victims, and were not equal to the seriousness of the crime. Courts also convicted three perpetrators, initially prosecuted under the trafficking law for lesser offenses, compared with two in 2020; the offenses included possession and supply of narcotics, assault, and fraudulent registration of a foreigner. The government reported occasional personnel shortages and delays in investigation and prosecutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Ministry of Justice and Public Order maintained the ATU, which conducted proactive investigations and used special investigative techniques, including surveillance, undercover operations, informants, and wire-tapping. However, observers reported that inadequate staffing and growing responsibilities outside of ATU's mandate limited the number of proactive investigations. For example, ATU spent much of its time helping victims with issues under the mandate of SWS, including assisting victims with administrative forms, applying for jobs on their behalf, and supporting victims with drug rehabilitation. GRETA and OSCE reported cases relied heavily on victim and witness testimonies, and the government often did not provide or seek corroborating evidence. In previous years, court proceedings lasted up to three years, and the government did not consistently ensure the continued inclusion of victim testimony after foreign national victims and witnesses returned to their countries of origin, resulting in lenient sentences, cases tried under lesser crimes, and acquittals of suspects on trafficking charges due to a lack of other evidence. The government did not report any new investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes; however, the government reported prosecuting a contractor working for the Ministry of Education for sex trafficking-related crimes. In September 2018, the ATU and the Internal Affairs Unit arrested and prosecuted four immigration police officers on suspicion of aiding a criminal network involved in trafficking; the trial was ongoing at the end of the reporting period. The ATU and the Police Academy continued to train police officers and prosecutors on trafficking issues, including new recruits and immigration officers. The government, in cooperation with civil society, also trained police officers on various anti-trafficking issues. The government executed three European arrest warrants, issued one European arrest warrant, and extradited a suspect from an EU country. The government started a joint investigation with Greek authorities and participated in a EUROPOL operation on forced labor with 24 countries.

PROTECTION

The government maintained victim protection efforts. The government identified 22 victims, compared with 25 victims in 2020. Of these, nine were sex trafficking victims, eight were forced labor victims, and five were victims of multiple types of exploitation, including forced criminality; 13 were women, seven were men, and there was one boy and one girl; and 15 were foreign victims. A multi-disciplinary NRM provided standard operating procedures for identifying and referring victims to services, including an operational manual, written guidance for first responders, and

guidelines specifically for children. The police conducted proactive identification efforts, including in apartments, pubs, and agricultural establishments; but GRETA and other observers reported the ATU lacked sufficient resources to effectively investigate all referrals of potential victims, particularly among the increasing number of asylum seekers. The NRM required first responders to conduct preliminary identification of potential victims and refer potential victims to SWS. SWS officers provided potential victims with information and notified the ATU, which officially identified victims. The government hired additional social workers and a new Deputy Minister in SWS to coordinate trafficking cases and strengthen victim protection. Additionally, the Minister of Justice signed an MOU with the Deputy Minister for Social Welfare to streamline cooperation between the ATU and SWS officers on the NRM. Civil society and ATU reported the implementation of the NRM improved, but SWS continued to respond slowly to some referrals of potential victims and failed to refer all potential victims to ATU for official identification procedures. For example, trafficking victims exploited prior to arriving in Cyprus and/or applying for asylum at immigration offices and reception centers may not be identified, according to GRETA and other observers, who documented SWS failing to refer some potential victims among asylum seekers to ATU. Additionally, SWS continued to lack the capacity to maintain contact with potential victims, and some potential victims did not have access to adequate accommodations and financial assistance. SWS maintained 42 officers dedicated to assisting newly arrived asylum seekers and implementing a screening system, including screening for indicators of trafficking. However, observers reported SWS deployed only a small number of the 42 officers to reception centers. SWS assigned an on-call officer outside of working hours and on weekends to provide emergency accommodation and financial support to potential victims, but observers noted that at times the NRM was not fully functional on weekends, and in previous years, the on-call SWS officer did not deem potential trafficking cases an emergency. The ATU interviewed 101 potential victims referred by SWS, compared with 196 in 2020. The government trained SWS officers on various victim protection efforts.

The law entitled officially identified victims to psycho-social services, health care, translation and interpretation services, education, vocational training, and financial assistance. Once ATU officially identified a victim, SWS evaluated the needs of victims and referred them to the appropriate government agencies and NGOs for assistance. SWS operated a specialized shelter for female sex trafficking victims with the capacity to accommodate 15 victims; the SWS-run shelter accommodated 33 victims in 2021 (50 in 2020). Victims may stay in the shelter for one month or longer, as appropriate, for a reflection period. The SWS-run shelter allowed adult victims to leave the shelter voluntarily after an assessment conducted by the ATU. The government allocated €459,100 (\$520,520) to operate the SWS-run shelter in addition to staff salaries, compared with €494,008 (\$560,100) in 2020. GRETA reported “a high standard of accommodation” in the SWS-run shelter, including living conditions, protections, and reintegration programs. NGOs reported the overall quality of SWS services improved significantly after the establishment of the new Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare and also reported appropriate service quality at the health care services and labor office. The government maintained a memorandum of cooperation with an NGO to manage transitional housing for female sex trafficking victims, which accommodated sex trafficking victims searching for permanent residence after leaving the state-run shelter, and to provide longer-term accommodation for female victims in apartments. The government also partnered with an NGO to provide apartments for male victims. The government allocated €145,000 (\$164,400) to the two NGOs providing shelter and accommodation, compared with €164,985 (\$187,060) in 2020. The government provided a rent subsidy and a monthly allowance for all victims, but victims faced obstacles to secure adequate accommodations due to increasing housing costs and greater demand for low-cost housing. The government did not report the amount allocated for rent allowances and financial assistance to trafficking victims through a public benefit scheme known as Guaranteed Minimum Income, compared with €213,622 (\$242,200) in 2020.

The government prioritized public benefit applications from trafficking victims over all other beneficiaries, but observers continued to report long delays, which were prolonged from reduced staff due to pandemic mitigation efforts, and victims waited several months to receive benefits with no retroactive payments. SWS provided emergency financial assistance to victims facing delays in receiving monthly allowances, but the amount was insufficient to cover basic necessities. The government allocated €52,500 (\$59,520) for emergency rent and assistance to cover urgent needs,

compared with €36,404 (\$41,270) in 2020. The government continued to fund an NGO-run children's house to provide education, placement into foster homes, and specialized medical and psycho-social care for child victims of sexual abuse and exploitation, including trafficking. Victims could access free health care at public hospitals but did not have access to the General Healthcare System, established in 2019, which allows free access to participating private sector healthcare providers. Employment counselors trained to handle sensitive cases sought suitable employment for each victim, and benefits to victims did not discontinue until a SWS officer and an employment counselor examined each case.

The government maintained a referral system to identify potential victims among people in detention facilities. In 2021, authorities dropped drug possession charges after identifying a suspect as a trafficking victim, but due to delays in formal identification procedures, other victims may have been detained in reception centers while waiting for their interviews. The government repatriated or granted residence permits and work authorization to foreign national victims, including those who decided after their reflection period not to cooperate with the police. The government granted five requests for residence and work permits (eight in 2020) and granted refugee or international protection status to six victims (three in 2020). However, in November 2020, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) informed a foreign labor trafficking victim—identified in 2015—that his residence and work permits would not be renewed and that he would be processed for repatriation due to the absence of a criminal court case against his traffickers. Prosecutors reportedly declined to prosecute his case due to a lack of corroborating evidence, and police arrested and detained the trafficking victim on March 14, 2021. After the international community inquired about the case, authorities released the victim on March 31, but his residency and work permits were still pending. Specialized personnel in the ATU, including a forensic psychologist, conducted interviews with victims before taking an official statement; 22 victims assisted law enforcement investigations (22 in 2020). Police permitted victims to leave Cyprus and return for trial after assessing the potential risks. ATU and SWS arranged for one victim to return to Cyprus to testify and covered accommodation and travel expenses for a victim's family member to emotionally support the victim. The government also covered the expenses for two victims to visit their families in their home country and return to Cyprus to serve as witnesses in the trial. However, victims and witnesses often left the country and did not return before trial due to long delays, hindering prosecution efforts. The law entitled victims to witness protection through a request made by the police to the Attorney General; no requests were made in 2021 or 2020. Police officers escorted victims to court proceedings, and the law allowed courts to hold closed-door trials, provide a partition to separate victims from their traffickers, use remote testimony, and use video-recorded testimonies for children; the government reported trials did not require these methods in 2021. Authorities provided victims' family members living abroad protection measures from intimidation and retaliation by arranging travel to Cyprus through diplomatic channels. The law allowed restitution through criminal cases and compensation through civil suits, but judges have never issued restitution, and authorities only approved two applications to date from victims for legal aid to pursue compensation.

PREVENTION

The government increased prevention efforts. The Multidisciplinary Coordinating Group (MCG) to combat trafficking, composed of relevant government agencies and NGOs, implemented and monitored anti-trafficking efforts. The MCG met three times in 2021 and twice in 2020. The government launched a new anti-trafficking hotline and advertised the number in government offices, in police stations, and on NGO premises. The hotline received eight calls, none of which led to a trafficking prosecution. In 2020, the Ombudsman produced two public reports on the government's anti-trafficking policies in response to civil society concerns. One report concluded government services did not fully implement provisions of the victim protection law because authorities did not renew the residence permits of victims exploited abroad; civil society filed a complaint stating authorities had not fully implemented the Ombudsman's recommendations. NGOs reported the government had not issued the recommended residency permits by the end of the reporting period. The law required employment agencies to acquire a permit and prohibited

withholding payment, confiscating passports, and charging workers for job searches, placement, and maintenance of employment. In 2021, the Ministry of Labor (MOL) inspected 154 employment agencies, revoked the licenses of 15 agencies, and fined one agency for fraud. MOI maintained a contract for employment of domestic workers and defined the process by which the employee or the employer could terminate the contract. In addition, the contract set a €309 (\$350) minimum monthly salary for domestic workers and required employers to be responsible for accommodation, medical insurance, meals, visa fees, travel expenses, and a repatriation ticket. The MCG formed a sub-committee on creating awareness campaigns focused on demand reduction; the subcommittee met twice. The government made additional efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts, including by criminalizing the demand and purchase of commercial sex from a trafficking victim.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Cyprus. Foreign victims identified in Cyprus in 2021 were from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Nigeria, Romania, Russia, and Syria. In previous years, victims were also from Cameroon, China, Czechia, Ethiopia, Greece, India, Moldova, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. Traffickers subject women, primarily from Eastern Europe, South and Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, to sex trafficking. Sex trafficking occurs in private apartments and hotels, on the street, and in bars, pubs, coffee shops, massage parlors, and cabarets known for the availability of commercial sex. Traffickers exploit short-term tourist visas available to Ukrainian and Russian nationals to recruit young women for sex trafficking in bars and private establishments and recruit some female sex trafficking victims with false promises of marriage or work as barmaids or hostesses. Traffickers subject foreign migrant workers—primarily from North Africa but also from South and Southeast Asia—to forced labor in agriculture. Employment agencies recruit and exploit migrant workers who enter the country on short-term work permits in labor trafficking; after the permits expire, traffickers use debt-based coercion, threats, and withholding of pay and documents. Domestic workers from India, Nepal, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka are vulnerable to forced labor. Traffickers subject asylum seekers from Southeast Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe to forced labor in agriculture and domestic work. Unaccompanied children, children of migrants, Roma, and asylum seekers are especially vulnerable to sex trafficking and forced labor. Romani children are vulnerable to forced begging. Traffickers exploit Cypriots addicted to drugs and young women with disabilities to commit criminal offenses such as distributing illegal substances and committing welfare benefits fraud.

AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

The northern area of Cyprus is administered by Turkish Cypriots. In 1983, the Turkish Cypriots proclaimed the area the independent “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”). The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any other country except Turkey. If the “TRNC” were to be assigned a formal ranking in this report, it would be Tier 3. “TRNC” does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity. Despite the lack of significant efforts, “TRNC” took some steps to address trafficking. In April 2018, “Parliament” passed the 2000 UN TIP Protocol and in March 2020, “Parliament” amended the “TRNC criminal code” to include trafficking for the first time. However, Turkish Cypriot representatives did not investigate, prosecute, or convict any traffickers. Turkish Cypriot representatives did not identify any trafficking victims and provided no victim protection, including shelter and social, economic, and psychological services. Turkish Cypriot representatives did not allocate funding, provide training, or implement prevention efforts to combat trafficking.

The “Nightclubs and Similar Places of Entertainment Law of 2000” stipulated nightclubs may only provide entertainment such as dance performances, but Turkish Cypriot representatives rarely enforced this “law,” and observers continued to report the 28 nightclubs in “TRNC” employing 617 women acted as brothels where sex trafficking commonly occurred. Police confiscated passports of

foreign national women working in nightclubs and issued them identity cards. “TRNC” representatives did not permit women to change location once under contract with a nightclub and routinely deported victims who voiced discontent about their treatment; Turkish Cypriot representatives deported 322 women who curtailed their contracts without screening for indicators of trafficking (255 in 2020). The “law” prohibited living off the earnings of prostitution or encouraging prostitution, but nightclub bodyguards accompanied female nightclub employees to their weekly health checks for sexually transmitted infections, ensuring the women did not share details about potential exploitation in commercial sex with police or doctors in order to facilitate continued illegal activity. The “law” that governed nightclubs prohibited foreign women from living at their place of employment; however, most women lived in dormitories adjacent to the nightclubs or in other accommodations arranged by the owner, a common indicator of trafficking.

The “Nightclub Commission,” composed of police and “government officials” who regulate nightclubs, met monthly and made recommendations to the “Ministry of Interior” regarding operating licenses, changes to employee quotas, and the need for intervention at a particular establishment. The “Nightclub Commission” reportedly inspected approximately five nightclubs every two weeks and followed up on complaints. However, in practice, inspections focused on the sanitation of kitchens, and interviews with women working in nightclubs always took place in front of nightclub bodyguards or staff, preventing women from speaking freely. Nightclubs provided a source of tax revenue for the Turkish Cypriot administration with media reports in 2015 estimating nightclub owners paid between 20 million and 30 million Turkish lira (\$1.54 million and \$2.32 million) in taxes annually, presenting a conflict of interest and a deterrent to increased political will to combat trafficking. Additionally, observers alleged complicit “government officials” were involved in organized criminal groups associated with nightclubs and alleged that some “parliament” members were among the nightclubs’ clientele. Despite business closures due to pandemic mitigation measures, night club owners continued to force victims into sex trafficking.

“TRNC” representatives did not report the number of six-month hostess and barmaid “work permits” for individuals working in nightclubs and pubs, compared with 942 six-month “work permits” issued between April 2019 and January 2020. Nightclub owners hired female college students to bypass the cap on the number of employees legally permitted in each club and to avoid taxes and monitoring. Most permit holders came from Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, while others came from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Paraguay, Tajikistan, Tanzania, and Turkmenistan. “TRNC” did not provide the number of “work permits” issued to domestic workers in 2021, 2020, or 2019 (3,143 in 2018). Turkish Cypriot representatives did not encourage potential victims to assist in prosecutions against traffickers and deported all potential victims. “TRNC” representatives did not enforce labor “laws,” and observers reported Turkish Cypriot representatives made little effort to investigate employers and recruitment agencies charging high recruitment fees, confiscating passports, and withholding salaries, which were common practices. Turkish Cypriots made no efforts to reduce demand for commercial sex acts. The “Social Services Department” in the “Ministry of Labor” continued to run a hotline for trafficking victims; however, it was inadequately staffed and not always operational, and experts reported trafficking victims were afraid to call the hotline because they believed it was linked to “TRNC” representatives. NGO-run hotlines reported 77 calls from potential trafficking victims and, in 2020, reported a 400 percent increase in requests for psychological assistance and a 300 percent increase in requests for legal assistance from potential victims.

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in the “TRNC.” Traffickers exploit women from Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa in sex trafficking in nightclubs licensed and regulated by Turkish Cypriot representatives. Men and women are exploited in forced labor in the industrial, construction, agriculture, domestic work, restaurant, and retail sectors. Traffickers control victims of forced labor through debt-based coercion, threats of deportation, restriction of movement, and inhumane living and working conditions. Labor trafficking victims originate from Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, and South and Southeast Asia. Migrants, especially those who cross into the area administered by Turkish Cypriots after their work permits in the Republic of Cyprus have expired, are vulnerable to labor trafficking. Romani children and Turkish seasonal workers and their families are also vulnerable to labor exploitation and trafficking. Foreign university students, many

of whom were recruited with false promises of scholarships, free housing, and employment, are vulnerable to both sex and labor trafficking. Traffickers force female students into sex trafficking in apartments and male students into forced labor or coerce students to commit crimes such as transporting or selling drugs. Students who drop out of school or engage in irregular work, many from sub-Saharan African countries, are particularly vulnerable. As in previous years, observers report that a number of women, some of whom are trafficking victims, entered the “TRNC” on three-month tourist or student visas and engaged in commercial sex in apartments in north Nicosia, Kyrenia, and Famagusta. Migrants, asylum seekers, LGBTIQ+ persons, refugees, and their children are also at risk for sexual exploitation. Observers report traffickers shifted tactics during the pandemic, forcing female sex trafficking victims to visit clients’ homes due to the drop in demand at nightclubs and often marketed home visits to potential clients under the guise of massage services. Civil society reports traffickers allegedly facing financial hardship due to the pandemic act with increased aggression towards victims.