



2018 Trafficking in Persons Report - Belize

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BELIZE: TIER 3

The Government of Belize does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so; therefore Belize remained on Tier 3. Despite the lack of significant efforts, the government took some steps to address trafficking, including the identification of 17 potential trafficking victims and the investigation of nine trafficking cases. However, the government did not begin any new prosecutions or convict any traffickers. The government did not investigate or prosecute any public officials for complicity in human trafficking-related offenses, despite allegations of a significant level of official complicity. During raids on commercial sex establishments, authorities uncovered few trafficking crimes due to limited intelligence-gathering, inconsistent application of formal victim identification procedures, and suspected complicity among some law enforcement officials. Victims were penalized for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being subjected to trafficking.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BELIZE

Implement the anti-trafficking law by vigorously investigating and prosecuting suspected sex and labor traffickers, including complicit officials, and imposing adequate penalties on convicted traffickers; consistently implement formal procedures to identify victims of sex and labor trafficking among vulnerable groups and refer identified victims to services; ensure trafficking victims are not penalized for crimes committed as a direct result of trafficking; provide specialized victim care, directly and in partnership with NGOs, and increase efforts to reintegrate victims; update and implement the national anti-trafficking plan; investigate and prosecute child sex tourists; amend laws to criminalize the knowing solicitation and patronizing of sex trafficking victims, including children; increase efforts to prevent and detect forced labor through the national labor recruiter registry; and provide training to diplomatic personnel.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained minimal anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. The 2013 Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Act criminalized sex and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of a minimum of eight years imprisonment for the trafficking of adults and a minimum of 12 years imprisonment for the trafficking of children, which were sufficiently stringent, and with regard to sex trafficking, commensurate with other serious crimes, such as rape. The 2013

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (Prohibition) Act criminalized the facilitation of prostitution of children younger than 18. This law, however, did not prohibit adults from engaging in sexual activity with 16- and 17-year-old children in exchange for remuneration, gifts, goods, food, or other benefits if there was no third party involved – leaving children of this age group vulnerable to sex trafficking.

The government reportedly investigated nine trafficking cases – three for forced labor and six for sex trafficking – compared to 10 in 2016, but for the third consecutive year did not initiate any new prosecutions. Authorities continued two prosecutions from 2015. The government did not convict any traffickers for the second consecutive year. Observers reported that a lack of communication and coordination between law enforcement and prosecutors hindered law enforcement efforts. The government did not provide detailed information on the pending investigations or prosecutions.

Law enforcement activity against suspected trafficking resulted from government agency and NGO referrals as well as raids on brothels. Despite having created a specialized police anti-trafficking unit in 2017, authorities uncovered few trafficking crimes due to limited intelligence-gathering, inconsistent application of formal victim identification procedures, and suspected complicity among some law enforcement officials. The government attempted, but was unable to end the practice of allowing off-duty police officers to provide security for brothels, which may have inhibited police from investigating allegations of trafficking in brothels and may have dissuaded victims from reporting trafficking. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in trafficking offenses; however, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns, inhibiting law enforcement action during the year. The government cooperated with two foreign governments, which resulted in the arrest of traffickers in their country of origin. The government provided limited funding to NGOs for anti-trafficking efforts, provided anti-trafficking training to some law enforcement and immigration officers, and law enforcement and prosecutors attended workshops financed and delivered by foreign governments and international organizations.

PROTECTION

The government maintained efforts to protect victims. Authorities identified 17 potential victims in 2017 – 14 foreign nationals and three Belizeans; six adult females, two adult males, and nine minor females – compared to 12 potential victims in 2016. Although the government reported law enforcement, immigration officials, and social service providers used formal written procedures to identify victims, officials did not consistently follow these procedures in practice. Belize's anti-trafficking law exempted victims from punishment for crimes committed as a result of being subjected to trafficking; however, victims identified in raids of commercial sex establishments were arrested, jailed, or deported for immigration violations or otherwise penalized for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being subjected to trafficking. Social service providers were not routinely present to screen, identify, and assist victims during law enforcement operations and raids on commercial sex establishments. The government said it screened 156 individuals for trafficking indicators during immigration operations with social workers ready to assist potential victims. Victims' fear of detention or deportation may have contributed to their reluctance to report trafficking to law enforcement officers. The government provided training to immigration officials, law enforcement, and social workers on victim identification and referral.

The government reported the Department of Human Services coordinated and funded shelter, medical, and psychological services to adult victims and potential victims during pending criminal proceedings generally provided by private parties, while children were placed in foster homes. Experts noted deficiencies in the foster care system, to include a lack of education about human trafficking for some foster parents, uneven coordination and communication between government

agencies and foster parents, and limited availability of psycho-social care for victims. However, the government said the support offered by foster families led to a successful conviction in 2016 and empowered victims. The government provided 200,000 Belizean dollars (\$100,000) to the Ministry of Human Development for the human trafficking response, which included funding for victim services, public awareness-raising, and the national anti-trafficking council. The government encouraged victims to assist in investigations by providing witness protection, confidentiality, and coordinating lodging and services. Court delays and fear of retaliation by traffickers may have led foreign national victims to decline or withdraw cooperation with law enforcement and return to their home countries. While the government had a policy to grant temporary residency status to foreign national victims willing to cooperate in investigations or prosecutions, it did not provide any victims this benefit in 2017, and anecdotal evidence suggested victims were often deported. Victims could apply for work permits free of cost, but the government did not grant any such permits in 2017.

PREVENTION

The government maintained minimal prevention efforts. The government reported it developed a 2016-2017 national anti-trafficking action plan with approximately 14 objectives. While it made progress by creating a specialized anti-trafficking police unit and formalizing the national anti-trafficking council, the remainder of the plan remained largely unimplemented. The government also reported authorities began developing a 2018-2020 plan during the reporting period. The government, in partnership with an NGO, raised awareness of the indicators of trafficking and a "crime stoppers" hotline number through billboards in English and Spanish. Radio and television broadcasters aired public service announcements to raise awareness about trafficking and sex tourism in English, Spanish, and Hindi. The national anti-trafficking council met quarterly, hired a permanent coordinator, and developed awareness-raising materials with the hotline number, including t-shirts, bags, bumper stickers, pens, and wristbands for distribution at health fairs and other public events. An NGO operated the "crime-stoppers" hotline, which was not trafficking-specific but could field trafficking-specific calls, although it did not receive any during the reporting period. Authorities continued to disseminate public service announcements on child sexual exploitation and the links between tourism and the demand for commercial sex, but did not investigate, prosecute, or convict any child sex tourists. The government revised its policy relating to foreign workers, which included prohibitions on the hiring of foreign workers in domestic service, bars and nightclubs, restaurants, caregiving, and construction, among others, to address identified vulnerabilities to trafficking in these sectors. The government reported the labor code required labor recruiters to register, but none had done so. The government did not provide anti-trafficking training for its diplomatic personnel.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, Belize is a source, transit, and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to sex trafficking and forced labor. The UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons reported family members facilitate the sex trafficking of Belizean women and girls. In tourist regions, foreign child sex tourists, primarily from the United States, exploit child sex trafficking victims. Sex trafficking of Belizean and foreign women and girls and LGBTI persons, primarily from Central America, occurs in bars, nightclubs, and brothels. Foreign men, women, and children – particularly from Central America, Mexico, and Asia – migrate voluntarily to Belize in search of work and are often exploited by traffickers who recruit victims using false promises of relatively high-paying jobs or take advantage of migrants' illegal status to subject them to forced labor. Some migrants are subjected to forced labor in restaurants, shops, agriculture, and fishing or to sex trafficking. Alleged trafficking-related complicity by government officials remains a problem.

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