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2024 Trafficking in Persons Report:

Bangladesh

BANGLADESH (Tier 2)

The Government of Bangladesh does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period; therefore Bangladesh remained on Tier 2. These efforts included increasing investigations, prosecutions, and convictions against traffickers. The government formally adopted victim identification guidelines for front-line officials and identified more victims of trafficking. The government also amended its overseas migrant workers policy to bring recruitment agents under greater oversight, thereby increasing accountability. In addition, the government deposited funding in a victim compensation fund for trafficking victims for the first time. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. Although the government increased law enforcement efforts, it did not take adequate steps to address internal trafficking crimes – including sex trafficking and forced child labor – or official complicity, both of which remained pervasive, and authorities continued to conflate human trafficking with migrant smuggling. The government did not sufficiently investigate and prosecute trafficking cases involving the exploitation of Rohingya refugees. The government did not establish any new Anti-Trafficking Tribunals. Victim protection efforts remained insufficient, and officials often lacked a victim-centered and trauma-informed approach when interacting with trafficking survivors. Shelters lacked specialized services for trafficking victims and few shelters were available outside Dhaka, particularly for men. The government continued to permit set recruitment fees which rendered many migrant workers indebted, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. Furthermore, courts sentenced the majority of traffickers to fines rather than jail time, which weakened deterrence, undercut the government's overall anti-trafficking efforts, and likely created security and safety concerns for victims.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Increase efforts to investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes, including complicit officials, and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms. * Increase efforts to identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, including disseminating and implementing formal victim identification procedures and screening processes and refer victims to appropriate services. * Strengthen the capacity of Anti-Trafficking Tribunal personnel to prosecute and adjudicate human trafficking cases, and expand tribunals to heavy caseload areas. * Increase the availability and quality of protection services for all trafficking victims, including adult male victims, foreign victims, victims exploited abroad, and victims intercepted in border areas; provide specialized services for trafficking survivors; and allow trafficking victims in government-run and -funded shelters freedom of movement. * Consistently enforce regulations and monitor labor recruitment companies, dalals (sub-agents), and brokers who supply labor to recruiting agencies, including by eliminating recruitment fees charged to migrant workers and holding fraudulent labor recruiters criminally accountable. * Increase investigations and prosecutions of credible allegations of trafficking of Rohingya, including cases that do not involve movement, and establish clear procedures for Rohingya to file complaints in the legal system. * Increase oversight of, and protections for, workers in the informal sectors, including home-based workers, and enable labor inspectors to file cases in labor or criminal courts as appropriate. * Increase monitoring to prevent child sex trafficking, particularly children who are experiencing homelessness or use the streets as a source of livelihood, as well as the children of adults engaged in commercial sex in brothels. * Train officials on a victim-centered and trauma-informed approach during investigation and prosecution of trafficking crimes. * Increase training

for officials, including law enforcement, labor inspectors, immigration officers, and health care providers, on identifying trafficking cases and referring victims to services. * Improve quality of pre-departure trainings for migrant workers, including sessions on labor rights, labor laws, and access to justice and overseas assistance. * Cease the inappropriate penalization of adult trafficking victims solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of trafficking. * Implement the 2015 MOU with India to streamline the identification and repatriation of Bangladeshi trafficking victims. * Adopt a revised and resourced comprehensive National Action Plan (NAP) that incorporates greater attention to prosecution and protection efforts, including dedicating resources to enhance victim care.

PROSECUTION

The government increased overall law enforcement efforts. The 2012 Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (PSHTA) criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of five years to life imprisonment and a fine of not less than 50,000 Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) (\$442.48). Bonded labor was treated as a separate crime with lesser prescribed penalties of five to 12 years' imprisonment and a fine of not less than 50,000 BDT (\$442.48). These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with regard to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other grave crimes, such as kidnapping.

The government reported it investigated 975 cases involving 4,042 suspects, including 172 sex trafficking cases, 682 labor trafficking cases, and 121 cases for unspecified forms of trafficking, and continued to investigate 532 cases from previous reporting periods. This compared with the investigation of 480 cases involving 2,033 suspects and continued investigation of 712 cases during the previous reporting period. The government reported initiating prosecution of 3,475 suspects in 1,083 cases and continued prosecution of 695 suspects from the previous reporting period. This compared with prosecution of 923 suspects in the previous reporting period. The seven Anti-Human Trafficking Tribunals, launched in 2020, enabled the government to increase the number of human trafficking prosecutions. The courts and tribunals convicted 407 traffickers and acquitted 2,842 suspects. This was an increase compared to the previous reporting period when courts convicted 94 traffickers in 35 cases. Courts sentenced most traffickers to fines rather than proportionate sentences, although some traffickers received a combination of imprisonment and fines. The imposition of fines rather than jail time weakened deterrence, undercut the government's overall anti-trafficking efforts, and likely created security and safety concerns, particularly for victims who cooperated with investigations and prosecutions. Despite conviction data included from only the cases filed under the PSHTA, the government likely reported non-human trafficking cases in its investigation and prosecution statistics, including potential cases of migrant smuggling. Labor court proceedings were often long and too costly for workers to pursue accountability; victims often hesitated to file claims because of their disadvantaged socioeconomic status, even in cases involving beatings and death, and accepted out-of-court settlements. The government's efforts were significantly under-resourced with only a small percentage of its anti-trafficking budget allocated to law enforcement agencies and courts. In addition, limited expertise on anti-trafficking investigations, inadequate evidence, and a reliance on victim-witnesses in criminal proceedings hindered law enforcement efforts. Police and prosecutors often did not collaborate effectively, which led to delays and weak cases. In addition, tribunal judges reportedly prioritized case disposal targets and failed to adequately consider the merits of individual cases; judgments did not always align with PSHTA sentencing guidelines. The government continued to train police officers through an anti-trafficking module at the police academy and conducted anti-trafficking training for judges and prosecutors. Police were frequently reassigned to new units every two to three years, which reduced institutional knowledge and negatively impacted active cases. Observers noted tribunal judges, prosecutors, and staff required further anti-trafficking training and incentives to effectively try cases while respecting due process.

The Bangladeshi police – including the Criminal Investigation Department, Police Bureau of Investigation, and the Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime Unit – was responsible for investigating human trafficking crimes, and a central monitoring cell coordinated investigations. In addition, the government established a new anti-trafficking cell under

the armed police battalion. The Anti-Human Trafficking Tribunals, comprising judges and special prosecutors assigned to hear human trafficking cases and address substantial case backlogs, heard trafficking cases in seven of Bangladesh's eight division capitals; judges responsible for 80 women and children courts heard cases involving violence against women and children, including trafficking, in 57 of 64 districts. Although the specialized tribunals reportedly reduced Bangladesh's human trafficking case backlog, the tribunals could not try ancillary crimes and many trafficking cases remained pending. The government reported at least 4,960 pending trafficking cases, compared to 4,732 pending cases from July to September 2022. The government previously announced plans to open additional tribunals, including in Cox's Bazar; however, it did not establish any new tribunals. The government continued to allow mobile courts, established under the executive branch, to adjudicate labor violations, although the courts could not address labor trafficking claims. Observers reported a lack of female law enforcement personnel hindered anti-trafficking efforts in Cox's Bazar.

A lack of sustained political will stymied efforts to reform abusive sectors and adequately address trafficking compared to the scale of the problem. Officials lacked a technical understanding of human trafficking and frequently conflated it with migrant smuggling or fraudulent labor practices. Some officials downplayed or denied the existence of human trafficking, particularly internal trafficking crimes in Bangladesh, including child sex trafficking and bonded labor. In cross-border cases, Bangladeshi officials struggled to coordinate with foreign investigative agencies, request and collect international evidence, and extradite suspected traffickers, likely resulting in underreporting of transnational cases. As a result, law enforcement frequently relied on civil society organizations (CSO) rather than government resources to address cross-border trafficking crimes. Bangladeshi police coordinated with INTERPOL on transnational trafficking cases. The government maintained mutual legal assistance (MLA) pacts, including with India and South Africa, to support investigations of ongoing trafficking cases; maintained extradition treaties with India, South Africa, and Thailand; and drafted a new bilateral document with Oman to combat human trafficking. In addition, the government implemented MLA guidelines – developed in partnership with civil society – to facilitate increased cooperation for those investigating transnational crimes, including human trafficking.

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

The government did not acknowledge official complicity in human trafficking and did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes; however, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns, inhibiting law enforcement and judicial action. The political and financial connections of the accused sometimes determined which cases law enforcement and prosecutors investigated and tried in court. Courts failed to investigate or prosecute suspects with political ties, and some judges dismissed cases because of political pressure or a desire to maintain case disposal rates. In registered brothels, some police allegedly charged bribes to ignore abuse in the establishments, did not check for the required age documentation, and procured fraudulent documents for girls as young as 10 years old. Government corruption reportedly included officials operating international border crossings, and some police allegedly accepted bribes to release

victims back to traffickers. In addition, government officials, including some parliamentarians and their families, maintained close ties to lucrative foreign employment agencies that often operated with limited oversight. Many recruitment agencies reportedly exploited official corruption to profit from overseas migration and even threatened lawyers against pursuing forced labor cases with impunity. Agencies allegedly bribed officials to allow them to charge recruitment fees to workers many times higher than the legal maximum. These practices increased workers' vulnerability to debt-based coercion. Media reported senior officials with the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) allegedly charged exorbitant fees to expatriate workers for fake exit clearance cards to facilitate non-existent jobs in the United Arab Emirates.

PROTECTION

The government increased protection efforts. The government did not report anti-trafficking data consistently from year to year, making it difficult to assess accurately the trafficking situation in country, discern year-to-year trends, and compare data. The government's protection efforts were significantly under resourced with only a small percentage of its anti-trafficking budget dedicated to protection. The government identified 1,210 trafficking victims, including 210 sex trafficking victims, 795 forced labor victims, and 205 victims of unspecified forms of trafficking. This was an increase compared to the 240 victims reportedly identified in the previous reporting period, and likely included victims of other crimes. Civil society and international organizations reported identifying at least 10,135 trafficking victims, including 1,784 victims of sex trafficking, 8,090 victims of labor trafficking, and 261 victims of unspecified forms of trafficking. Observers noted the government's efforts to identify trafficking victims among the significant population of migrant workers returning to Bangladesh remained inadequate.

In December 2023, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA), the government's lead ministry for combating trafficking, rolled out victim identification guidelines for police and border officials to identify potential trafficking victims, particularly among vulnerable groups. The government disseminated the guidelines, which replaced earlier victim identification SOPs, to police and prosecutors to use to distinguish between human trafficking and migrant smuggling, identify trafficking victims, and screen vulnerable groups, including individuals engaged in commercial sex. The guidelines were intended to improve victim identification with step-by-step instructions and reduce misinterpretation of trafficking crimes. Government officials often lacked a victim-centered approach when interacting with potential trafficking victims and survivors. However, the government, in partnership with civil society, conducted trainings on trauma-informed care for officials providing services. Despite the new victim identification guidelines, law enforcement required more training to identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, including individuals engaged in commercial sex and, as a result, may have inappropriately penalized sex trafficking victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Police enforcement operations at brothels resulted in arrests of foreign national women for visa violations without efforts to screen for trafficking, and operations targeting hotel-based commercial sex sometimes resulted in law enforcement accusing young women and girls of criminal behavior under PSHTA sections 12 and 13 without screening for trafficking indicators. In addition, observers stated traffickers reportedly filed false cases against trafficking survivors, and the government was slow to dismiss frivolous cases. Authorities may have also detained and fined trafficking victims at border crossings for false identification, failure to carry a passport, or irregular migration. Border officials reportedly screened migrants for trafficking, although some of these individuals may have been subsequently prosecuted for irregular migration. The government previously penalized some returning Bangladeshi migrant workers with substantial indicators of trafficking without appropriately screening them for trafficking, claiming the individuals were "damaging the image of the nation." Immigration officials screened suspected trafficking victims at Bangladesh's three international airports and the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE) operated a desk at the Dhaka airport, providing financial assistance and information on available NGO services to returning female migrant workers, including trafficking victims.

The MOHA, with support from civil society and trafficking survivors, drafted a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) to guide victim referrals to protection services. Counter Trafficking Committee

(CTC) members and police used referral directories to refer victims and at-risk individuals to services, although the absence of a formal NRM created challenges referring identified victims to appropriate services. The government referred at least 592 victims to services compared with 232 victims referred to government shelters in the previous reporting period. The government reported it could provide trafficking victims with health care, legal services, shelter, vocational training, and other services at support centers operated by MEWOE, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA), and other government ministries. The government provided services to 193 victims, compared to the 275 potential victims it reported during the previous reporting period. NGOs and international organizations reportedly provided services to 9,739 victims. The government's NGO Affairs Bureau delayed approval for foreign funding to some NGOs working on some human rights issues, which affected availability and provision of services to vulnerable populations, including trafficking victims.

The MOWCA and Ministry of Social Welfare (MSW) provided services to vulnerable populations, including trafficking victims. MOWCA operated six shelter homes for women and children, including trafficking victims. The MSW, through the Department of Social Services (DSS), operated an additional six shelter homes for women and children, three child development centers, and six government shelter homes; men, women, and children could use the services, although none of the centers had specialized services for trafficking victims. Observers suggested additional safe houses – particularly for victims participating in criminal proceedings – were necessary. Police operated multiple centers for women and child victims of violence, including trafficking, in each of Bangladesh's eight divisions, offering short-term shelter, medical services, and psychological care. The DSS operated six centers to provide education and vocational training to women seeking alternatives to engaging in commercial sex, including trafficking victims. The DSS maintained its comprehensive victim services guidelines to ensure minimum standards of care in government-run shelters. The government provided BDT 496.6 million (\$4.39 million) to operate the DSS shelter facilities; information on funding for additional shelters was unavailable. There were few government shelters, particularly for men, and accommodations were even more limited outside Dhaka. Despite legal guidelines to administer services equitably, the government did not consistently view men as trafficking victims or routinely identify or provide comparable services to male victims. While some NGO shelters could house male victims, the majority of government and NGO shelters could not; however, most NGOs could provide other services to adult male victims. The government did not typically have specialized services available for trafficking victims, including for girls removed from child sex trafficking in red-light districts or for victims recovering from significant trauma. Authorities commonly referred victims to government-run shelter homes for services, although the government occasionally referred victims to NGO-run shelters with specialized services. The MSW operated long-term shelters for women and child victims of violence, including trafficking victims. The government required trafficking victims to obtain a court order to access government services, including shelter. The government also required NGOs and international organizations to obtain a separate court order to provide additional services to victims in government shelters. The government required trafficking victims, especially without legal residency in Bangladesh, to remain in shelters until repatriation to their country of origin; victims residing in shelters did not have freedom of movement.

The PSHTA entitles victims to protection during judicial proceedings, including police security, and allowed victims to provide testimony via video conference; several potential Rohingya trafficking victims testified using video facilities for the first time. The government reported at least 438 trafficking victims participated in the investigation and prosecution of traffickers; however, insufficient implementation of the protection provision likely discouraged some victims from participation. Trafficking victims often did not testify in court because of fears of retaliation or reprisals from traffickers and inadequate police protection. Observers reported victims and accused traffickers often appeared in court at the same time, and suspects sometimes threatened victims to discourage testifying. Trafficking victims were often required to testify in court where law enforcement, prosecutors, and judicial officials lacked a victim-centered and trauma-informed approach to interacting with trafficking victims during trials. The government offered financial support for transportation to testify and free legal services to trafficking victims through public and special prosecutors, the district offices of the National Legal Aid Service Organization, and government-run District Legal Aid Committees. Some organizations reported victims had difficulty

accessing these legal services. The government did not provide legal alternatives to the removal of foreign trafficking victims to countries where they might face hardship or retribution. However, foreign victims of trafficking were legally entitled to the same benefits as Bangladeshi nationals under the PSHTA. The government required most CSOs to receive a court order or refugee camp officials to provide shelter services to trafficking victims in Cox's Bazar.

The government provided some assistance to trafficking victims overseas, including some support at embassies, repatriation assistance in certain circumstances, and limited access to accommodations and victim services. The MEWOE maintained 30 labor offices, or labor welfare wings, in embassies and consulates in 27 major destination countries to provide welfare services to Bangladeshi migrant workers through 44 diplomatic officials trained on trafficking issues. These officials were responsible for reviewing and verifying employment documents. Observers continued to report these labor wings had neither the staffing nor the resources to adequately assist the large number of migrant workers, especially at embassies in Middle Eastern countries with substantial numbers of Bangladeshi workers. The MEWOE operated four safe houses abroad for workers with strong indicators of trafficking who fled abusive employers, but it did not report how many victims it assisted among them. The government repatriated at least 18 victims of unspecified forms of trafficking from Russia while NGOs and international organizations repatriated another 344 victims of trafficking; the government also repatriated 917 Bangladeshi migrant workers from Libya, the People's Republic of China, and Romania, which may have included trafficking victims. While the government funded the repatriation of some trafficking victims, lengthy delays resulted in many victims funding the travel costs themselves, incurring additional debt. The government largely relied on civil society and international organizations to assist with repatriations of trafficking victims and provide support to victims after their return. The Rescue, Recovery, Repatriation, and Integration Task Force continued to cooperate with India on trafficking cases primarily involving women and children. The MOHA and the Government of India continued to finalize previously drafted victim identification and repatriation SOPs to guide officials in the repatriation process. The governments facilitated, and civil society often funded, repatriation of trafficking victims from India, but without formal SOPs, the lengthy and complex approval process resulted in some Bangladeshi victims languishing in Indian shelters for years.

The government did not consistently initiate criminal investigations into migrant workers exploited abroad and civil remedies remained inadequate. Trafficking victims were entitled to court-ordered restitution from traffickers or compensation from a fund established by the government. Although the victim compensation fund was legally mandated by the PSHTA in 2012, the government allocated 2 million BDT (\$17,699) for the first time. The government reported courts ordered restitution to an unspecified number of trafficking victims. Trafficking victims could also file civil suits seeking compensation. Compensation from the victim fund was rarely awarded in criminal cases, and lengthy delays characterized many civil suits. Out-of-court settlements between victims and traffickers remained common, and most settlements required victims to recant their testimony, effectively eliminating the possibility of the trafficker facing a criminal conviction. The MEWOE oversaw an alternative system of arbitration allowing overseas Bangladeshi workers who secured their employment through the MEWOE to lodge complaints seeking compensation for labor and recruitment violations, including allegations of forced labor, through an arbitration process. However, the process typically yielded minimal awards. Observers reported the BMET, the agency responsible for facilitating arbitration, prohibited victim advocates from accompanying migrant workers, forcing workers to arbitrate claims alone against powerful recruitment agencies and the BMET. The government reported arbitration of trafficking cases with the BMET is more common than criminal charges under the PSHTA; officials typically encourage the relevant recruiting agency to offer the victim a sum of money to resolve the complaint. As a result, potential human trafficking incidents may be handled as labor issues involving negotiation and arbitration rather than a criminal offense; the civil penalties in these situations are less severe than those under the PSHTA. BMET arbitration resulted in an unspecified number of potential victims each receiving 250,000 BDT (\$2,212.39).

PREVENTION

The government increased efforts to prevent trafficking. The MOHA remained the focal ministry for anti-trafficking efforts and continued to lead the inter-ministerial committee for combating human trafficking, which met bi-monthly to coordinate government activities. The National Authority, designated as a government-wide supervisory body to combat trafficking, met three times; however, it required capacity building and further institutionalization to improve inter-ministerial collaboration. The government did not clarify the distinct roles of the National Authority versus the inter-ministerial committee, and the National Authority's inactivity often led the government to depend on civil society for coordinating and implementing its anti-trafficking initiatives. The government supported several other task forces and committees to monitor progress on anti-trafficking efforts and to harmonize efforts between government agencies, NGOs, and international organizations. The government continued to support CTCs at district, sub-district, and union levels to facilitate coordination between local governments and civil society to combat human trafficking. The government, in coordination with partners, continued to implement the 2018-2022 NAP, which was extended through 2025, and incorporated a reference to internal trafficking for the first time. However, the NAP did not adequately guide government agencies in coordinating their mandates to prevent trafficking. In addition, the NAP did not specifically address Rohingya victims of trafficking. The government allocated BDT 2 million (\$17,699) for trafficking prevention, including NAP implementation. Observers recommended officials increase the plan's financial allocations to prosecution, protection, and partnership efforts, as well as monitoring and evaluation. In addition, the MOHA started to develop an online national trafficking database with support from an international partner. The government continued to conduct national awareness campaigns through print media, television, radio, and text messages as well as through CTCs and community meetings, at times in partnership with civil society. Most campaign materials were available in Bangla and English. The government maintained several general helplines to report crime, including human trafficking. From April to November 2023, officials reportedly received at least 378 calls involving human trafficking allegations.

The government implemented 21 bilateral labor agreements in part intended to protect Bangladeshi workers abroad and began talks to expand agreements with other countries. However, the government did not adequately enforce these bilateral agreements, frequently resulting in insufficient victim support from Bangladeshi embassies. The government participated in a multi-country working group – including Bhutan, Burma, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand – to combat human trafficking in the Bay of Bengal. A government task force continued to monitor the implementation of the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. The government also maintained a national reintegration policy for migrants to ensure safe returns and successful reintegration in Bangladesh. The government stated that its procurement rules prohibited and prevented trafficking in its supply chains.

The government continued to require Bangladeshi migrants complete pre-departure training, which included safe migration and anti-trafficking components, and a 30-day pre-departure training course for women involved in domestic work. The government offered safe migration information through district employment and manpower offices and training centers; however, the government did not report how many migrants were aware of these services and accessed them before traveling abroad. Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited, a government-run recruiting agency, organized district-level job fairs to increase awareness of ethical recruitment and safe migration methods among potential migrants. The BMET operated approximately 104 technical training centers offering a pre-departure curriculum including labor rights and skills training; however, only a small percentage of migrant workers participated in the trainings prior to departure. BMET instruction did not adequately address labor rights, medical care while abroad, or the process for safe returns. In addition, BMET-certified pre-departure orientation sessions were available online for migrant workers.

The government amended the 2013 Overseas Employment and Migrants Act (OEMA) to establish more comprehensive regulations and bring recruiting agents and representatives under greater oversight while improving accountability and transparency. In line with the amended OEMA, MEWOE formed a committee to draft rules for regulating sub agents. The OEMA criminalized fraudulent recruitment and unlawful recruitment fees; however, the government continued to set legal recruitment fees at rates between 85,000 BDT and 262,000 BDT (\$752-\$2,319), high enough

to render many migrant workers indebted and vulnerable to trafficking through debt-based coercion, and many migrants paid more than the legally permissible rates. The government established fixed recruitment fees for 16 labor-receiving countries with the largest number of Bangladeshi workers. Some government officials advocated for employer-paid recruitment fee models and the government pursued agreements with some countries. However, workers continued to pay large fees that were greater than the fixed amount to pay for service charges, airfares, passports, visas, medical fees, and other expenses. Observers assessed the high cost of legal migration drove some prospective migrants to unlicensed agents whose promises of alternative paths to overseas employment facilitated exploitation, including human trafficking. The Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) acknowledged that, before beginning the formal recruitment process, migrant workers frequently paid fees to sub-agents – or dalals – fees in addition to the legal amount charged by BAIRA agents. Dalals also directly connected workers to overseas jobs by providing fake visas and other documentation and, in some cases, incorrect or deceptive information about the migration process and job in the destination country. Despite collecting fees, BAIRA did not have any programs to assist trafficking victims.

The government required recruitment agencies or authorized representatives to receive approval to recruit workers for overseas employment. The BAIRA oversaw more than 2,200 licensed labor recruitment agencies. The MEWOE had the authority to register recruiting dalals and required brokers to register sub-agents and representatives; the government did not report how it monitored for compliance. The MEWOE suspended 126 recruitment agencies for operating in violation of the law, including breach of employment contracts and recruitment regulations, and blocked another 239 agencies; however, most of the suspended agencies subsequently resumed operations. The MEWOE continued to develop a classification system to rank licensed recruiting agencies into categories based on compliance with the law, including adherence to government-fixed recruitment fees, number of branch offices, and frequency of complaints. The government's Vigilance Task Force (VTF) – a multiagency effort to monitor and enforce compliance of rules and regulations during the migration process and prevent irregular migration – continued operations against corrupt recruitment agencies, travel agencies, and dalals who operated in rural locations and connected prospective migrant workers to licensed employment agencies. The VTF-operated mobile courts received complaints, took legal action against agencies and institutions, disseminated migration information to agencies, and prevented human trafficking under the pretenses of labor migration.

The government did not adequately combat child labor, including the worst forms of child labor, through its failure to consistently enforce labor laws, ineffective monitoring of work places, and restrictions on where labor inspectors could go. Observers reported the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MOLE) claimed there was no forced labor and no forced child labor in Bangladesh despite rampant evidence to the contrary. The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) is the only authority responsible for enforcing child labor laws. However, the DIFE had authority to file cases in labor courts – not criminal courts – and the labor courts have never referred cases to the criminal courts. Observers noted the government did not hold officials or business owners accountable for violating existing labor laws, which resulted in worsening conditions for workers. The DIFE removed 3,474 children from hazardous conditions through inspections, which may have included trafficking victims; this compared to 3,990 children during the previous reporting period. The DIFE reportedly investigated allegations of forced labor in brick kilns, although no violations were reported. Staffing and resources to inspect for labor violations, including forced and child labor, remained severely inadequate, and there were no inspectors dedicated to child labor. The DIFE could only conduct unannounced inspections in factories located outside designated export processing zones. Inspectors were not empowered to monitor the informal sector despite an estimated 93 percent of child labor – including forced child labor – occurring there. DIFE labor inspectors did not receive sufficient training on forced labor. The MOLE needed to significantly increase the number of labor inspections under international standards.

The government collaborated with the Inter-Sector Coordination Group – responsible for coordinating the activities of humanitarian organizations in the Rohingya refugee response – to disseminate trafficking-related awareness-raising messages among Rohingya populations and the host communities, and facilitated access for international organizations and civil society to conduct

anti-trafficking awareness activities in Rohingya camps. However, the government's efforts to prevent trafficking of refugees remained inadequate. Rohingya refugees did not enjoy freedom of movement in Bangladesh. Low enrollment of Rohingya adolescents is due to previous gaps in educational access, cultural expectations of adolescent girls, and concerns about safety while traveling to school. Rohingya vulnerability to trafficking increased as a result of a government ban restricting Rohingya from attending Bangladeshi public schools and the inability of Rohingya to work legally.

The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts nor make efforts to reduce the demand for extraterritorial commercial child sexual exploitation and abuse. However, the government revised processes for birth registration to ensure the children of women involved in commercial sex could receive identity documents regardless of the father's identity, thereby reducing the vulnerability of the children to trafficking. In addition, the local government in Faridpur provided education grants to the daughters of women involved in commercial sex to reduce their vulnerability to sex trafficking and exploitation. The government provided basic anti-trafficking training to Bangladeshi military and police officers prior to their deployment as peacekeepers, and reported it provided anti-trafficking training for its diplomatic personnel.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Bangladesh, and traffickers exploit victims from Bangladesh abroad. The government tended to disproportionately focus on international labor trafficking and dedicated less attention to internal trafficking, including bonded labor, domestic forced labor, sex trafficking, and the worst forms of child labor. The most at-risk groups included victims of child marriage and GBV; low-income households; historically marginalized castes, including Dalit and Harijan communities; seasonal laborers; poorly educated and unemployed youth and students; people affected by natural disasters and climate change; Rohingya refugees; and people attempting to reach other countries through irregular migration. A national study concluded that economic need is the largest risk factor creating vulnerability to trafficking; other individual factors include domestic violence, child marriage, health expenses, and lack of access to education. Bangladesh has the highest prevalence of child marriage in South Asia, and approximately 50 percent of girls are married by age 18, with rates rising significantly during the past three years. The government reported that climate-induced migration and displacement is increasing the vulnerability of Bangladeshis to trafficking; officials estimated that 700,000 people have been displaced each year on average during the previous decade because of natural disasters. Traffickers increasingly rely on social media and mobile messages to lure potential victims, particularly targeting women and girls, for sex and labor trafficking.

Bangladesh is the world's sixth largest migrant-sending country and the eighth largest country receiving remittances, according to an international report in 2022. Most Bangladeshi workers migrate to the Middle East, with others traveling to India, Maldives, Pakistan, and Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The government facilitates the migration of tens of thousands of skilled and semi-skilled workers at low or no cost; men comprise the majority of migrant workers, but women increasingly travel for domestic work and employment in other sectors. Most migrants are low-skilled or unskilled workers who use middlemen and private recruitment agencies to arrange foreign employment and travel. Recruiters often prefer low-skilled workers, whose employers typically do not cover fees, to increase their profits. Many workers assume debt to pay high recruitment fees, imposed legally by recruitment agencies registered with BAIRA or illegally by unlicensed sub-agents; this places workers at risk of debt-based coercion. Although one study found that the cost of migration has decreased slightly in recent years, Bangladeshi workers often pay the highest migration fees in the region. Observers estimated it can take many months for workers to repay loans to recruiters, adding pressure to overstay visas, and increasing vulnerability to trafficking. Some migrants traveling abroad via informal channels do not find employment and sink deeper into debt, which increases their vulnerability to exploitation. Some recruitment agencies, agents, and employers also commit recruitment fraud, including contract switching; this includes promising women and children jobs and exploiting them in sex trafficking upon arrival. A Bangladeshi parliamentarian associated with one such employment

agency was previously convicted and imprisoned in Kuwait on charges involving bribery to bring thousands of migrant workers to the Middle East. Traffickers exploit male victims in forced labor abroad in agriculture and construction. Most Bangladeshi migrant workers report experiencing some form of labor exploitation, including fraudulent contracts, discrepancies in wages or work hours, and low or unpaid wages. In recent years, destination countries have recorded tens of thousands of cases involving underpayment or non-payment of wages, overworked employees, passport retention, physical abuse, and instances of young workers dying from kidney diseases because of inadequate protections in working environments. The bodies of many deceased Bangladeshi domestic workers have been repatriated from the Middle East and other regions; however, the government tracks only registered migrants. A study reported that nearly all the deceased migrant workers had died of unnatural causes in destination countries, including Gulf states. Traffickers also recruit many victims with fraudulent job offers leading to cyber scam operations, mostly in Southeast Asia.

High recruitment fees and the economic marginalization of many Bangladeshi women result in female migrants incurring debts that increase vulnerability to coercion. Traffickers exploit Bangladeshi women and girls in forced labor and sex trafficking abroad, including in India, Pakistan, and Gulf countries. Female migrants seeking employment as domestic workers reportedly experience significant risks of trafficking, often in the Gulf states and Southeast Asia. Observers estimate that children constitute 40 percent of Bangladeshi sex trafficking victims exploited abroad. Traffickers have reportedly become increasingly sophisticated at deceiving the families of victims to delay filing of missing persons reports.

Traffickers often exploit individuals from rural communities migrating to urban areas or abroad. Traffickers use debt-based coercion to compel workers into labor, exploiting an initial debt assumed by a worker as part of the employment terms. Traffickers use coercive debts to force Bangladeshi families and Indian migrants to work in aluminum, brick kilns, garment factories, dry fish production, shrimp and fish processing industries, shipbreaking, and tea plantations. Traffickers also target female-led households in villages experiencing vulnerability after men migrate for work or women separate from their families. Bangladesh, one of the largest textile exporters in the world, relies on subcontractors in informal workshops to sustain the ready-made garment industry, but most garment factories lack adequate oversight. Garment workers often lack formal contracts and receive meager wages while enduring labor abuses. Garment workers continued to face harassment, sexual violence, and even murder, with limited accountability for factory owners. Observers noted that domestic workers and construction workers lack adequate legal protection, resulting in the risk of exploitation. Bangladeshi children are at risk for forced labor primarily in the informal sector and industries such as agriculture, production of bidis (hand-rolled cigarettes), brick making, construction, domestic work, dried fish processing, furniture production, garment manufacturing, hospitality, restaurants, shipbreaking, street-based work, tanneries, tea plantations, and welding. A 2022 study estimated more than one million children were involved in hazardous forms of child labor, particularly in rural areas, family-based agriculture, and the informal sector. Observers estimate 120,000 children work in the Keraniganj industrial district's garment factories, often in deplorable conditions; many children are indentured and serve as collateral for their parents' loans. A study estimated that approximately 40,000 children are forced to work at dried fish processing units while their parents receive money advances against the children's salaries. Children also worked on fishing vessels and dangerous jobs in the fishing industry, particularly along Bangladesh's coastal areas where poverty rates are high and children work to repay family loans. Traffickers force children younger than 12 years into domestic work and most female child laborers are domestic workers who seldom appear in official child labor statistics; violent incidents – including physical abuse, rape, and torture – were widespread yet underreported, with most cases settled privately. In addition, there are an estimated 3.4 million children experiencing homelessness in Bangladesh and traffickers coerce some of these children into forced criminality or forced begging; traffickers force children, especially in border areas, to produce and transport drugs, particularly a methamphetamine-caffeine drug called yaba.

Traffickers continue to exploit adults and children from all regions of the country in Bangladesh's legal brothels, many illegal brothels, and private hotels. Child sex trafficking remained widespread with an estimated 30,000 girls exploited in Bangladesh. Some observers estimate that less than 10

percent of women voluntarily entered Bangladesh's commercial sex industry. Some women reported they had grown up in brothels because their mothers were engaged in commercial sex and brothel owners then exploited them in sex trafficking as children; observers report children growing up in Bangladesh's red-light districts seldom escape these brothels. Other women and girls reported traffickers preyed on them and sold them to brothels after fleeing abusive child marriages. Traffickers use false promises of work to lure poor women and children into sex trafficking and fabricate exorbitant debts that women and girls as young as 10 must repay. A study found that child sex trafficking victims are forced to take more clients at lower wages and experience more violence and sickness than adults voluntarily engaged in commercial sex. Commercial sex is legal in registered brothels, and the individuals involved – including foreign nationals – must receive documentation from police confirming their age and consent; however, some police accept bribes to ignore abuse in the establishment, forego checking for required age documentation, and procure fraudulent documentation for children as young as 10 years old. Children experiencing homelessness or using the streets as a source of livelihood in exchange for food, shelter, protection, and money often lack birth certificates or documentation and experience greater vulnerability to exploitation, including trafficking. Children experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, including trafficking, and Dalit and Indigenous children faced heightened risks due to discrimination. Observers reported nearly 80 percent of child trafficking victims are also exploited in the production of child sexual abuse material.

Bangladesh hosts approximately one million Rohingya refugees across 33 camps in the Cox's Bazar host community and Bhasan Char, of which more than 740,000 arrived after August 2017. Traffickers exploit Rohingya from refugee camps in sex and labor trafficking in Bangladesh and transnationally. Traffickers transport Rohingya girls in Bangladesh and internationally to India, Malaysia, and Nepal for sex trafficking, sometimes using false promises of jobs or marriage; some traffickers "trade" these girls through the Internet. Government restrictions on post-secondary education and legal employment have contributed to Rohingya refugee's vulnerability to trafficking and led many Rohingya to migrate onward through irregular channels, thereby increasing risks of trafficking. Inadequate monthly rations have increased pressure on Rohingya families to remove children from school for child labor or early marriage. Rohingya children are vulnerable to trafficking, including child sex trafficking. Rohingya families arrange marriages for their children in other countries, including Malaysia, and girls are sometimes forced into marriages. Many Rohingya experience trafficking and other forms of exploitation while relying on migrant smugglers to help them leave Bangladesh. Some Bangladeshi officials allegedly facilitate trafficking of Rohingya, including accepting bribes from traffickers to gain access to camps, and engage in extortion and harassment. Rohingya girls and boys are recruited from camps and forced to labor as shop hands, fishers, rickshaw pullers, and domestic workers. Some Rohingya men who fled to Bangladesh from Burma decades ago have been trapped in forced labor through debt-based coercion to Bangladeshi fishermen for years. Tourists have increased demands for extraterritorial sexual exploitation and abuse, including exploitation of Rohingya girls, near Cox's Bazar. Rohingya often lack sufficient access to formal criminal justice systems and social services when exploitation occurs.