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2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Afghanistan

AFGHANISTAN (Tier 3)

The United States has not yet made a decision whether to recognize the Taliban or any other entity as the government of Afghanistan. All references to “the pre-August 15, 2021, government” refer to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. References to the Taliban in this report do not denote or imply that the United States recognizes the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so; therefore Afghanistan remained on Tier 3. During the reporting period, Afghan ministries and other public sector institutions did not take meaningful steps to eliminate trafficking. In addition, there was a pattern of employing or recruiting child soldiers and a pattern of sexual slavery by the Taliban (*bacha bazi* – a practice in which men exploit boys for social and sexual entertainment). The Taliban did not make efforts to address labor trafficking and sex trafficking, nor did it identify or protect any trafficking victims. The Taliban continued to undermine the rights of women, members of minority groups, and other vulnerable populations, and it hindered the work of NGOs, further exacerbating vulnerabilities to trafficking and obstructing the protection of victims.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Cease the unlawful recruitment or use of children by the Taliban, including at the local levels, and demobilize children from all armed groups with adequate protection and reintegration support. * Enforce the

ban on the use of children for sexual slavery (*bacha bazi*) in the ranks of the Taliban, including at the local levels. * Increase efforts to identify trafficking victims, including by screening for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations, including returning migrants, children involved in street begging, and individuals in commercial sex, and refer them to NGOs and international organizations for protection services. * Ensure victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, including individuals in commercial sex. * Increase cooperation with civil society organizations seeking to assist vulnerable populations, including male and female trafficking victims, including by re-opening victim shelters throughout the country. * Enact and implement a comprehensive anti-trafficking law that criminalizes all forms of trafficking in persons. * Formally convene an inter-ministerial anti-trafficking commission to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts.

PROSECUTION

Afghan ministries and other public sector institutions did not take meaningful steps to enforce anti-trafficking laws. In addition, the Taliban made no anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. During the previous reporting period, the Taliban announced it would review all existing criminal laws and some would remain in effect unless they violated the Taliban's interpretation of sharia, as determined by Taliban courts. For a second consecutive year, the Taliban did not report whether they viewed any laws enacted under the pre-August 15, 2021 government related to trafficking as remaining in effect, and did not report any laws criminalizing sex trafficking or labor trafficking. According to observers, the Taliban has purported to revoke Afghanistan's constitution and criminal code, including all laws on the protection of children, and judicial processes are based on interpretations of religious jurisprudence. Enforcement of Taliban laws varies across the country, with local leaders frequently issuing their own edicts, because of the elimination of specialized institutions. Observers noted that the Taliban prohibits lawyers from referencing the Afghanistan penal code that was enacted under the pre-August 15, 2021 government in court, leaving vulnerable populations without protection in the justice system.

The police, which are under the Ministry of Interior, are responsible for investigating criminal offenses, including trafficking. The Taliban did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of trafficking crimes. The Taliban did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of Taliban members for alleged complicity in trafficking crimes. Observers reported challenges in the Taliban's ability to distinguish human trafficking from migrant smuggling and that lack of capacity hindered efforts. Impunity was a significant problem among the Taliban, and there was no formal system of accountability.

Although *bacha bazi* is officially banned, the practice has continued after the Taliban takeover. Observers reported that Taliban members were, in some cases, perpetrators of *bacha bazi*. The Taliban recruited and used children in combat and combat support roles. The Taliban denied its recruitment and use of children, reporting that its code of conduct prohibited boys with no facial hair from being allowed onto the battlefield or military bases. Observers reported local Taliban members recruited children by falsifying ages on their identification cards.

PROTECTION

Afghan ministries and other public sector institutions did not take meaningful steps to identify or provide services to trafficking victims. In addition, the Taliban did not report any protection efforts. The Taliban did not report identifying any trafficking victims or providing services. An NGO reported operating two shelters for child victims of crime and children experiencing homelessness in Kabul, which could also assist child victims of trafficking; the NGO noted it assisted two demobilized child soldiers during the reporting period. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA) operated an orphanage for boys, which could assist victims of crime, including trafficking. There were no reports of Taliban-run shelters for women or men who were victims of crime, including trafficking. Civil society representatives reported significant challenges maintaining or receiving approval to provide protection services, a lack of capacity, and limited funding, hindering overall efforts. Observers have reported the Taliban's firm resistance to discussing sex trafficking and allowing protection services for victims, particularly women and girls. Reportedly, civil society actors, including those assisting crime victims, continued to operate in an environment of uncertainty, fear, harassment, and interference by the Taliban. The Taliban severely limited the work of NGOs by prohibiting Afghan women from working at NGOs outside the healthcare and education sectors and detaining female staff for not being accompanied by a *mahram* (male chaperone), likely affecting the availability of trafficking victim services. Authorities often placed child trafficking victims in detention centers alongside adults where children experienced unlawful prison labor or conditions with indicators of forced labor, torture, and sexual abuse; detained children did not have access to a lawyer. Observers noted police often arrested children begging in the streets without conducting any screenings for trafficking indicators.

The Taliban did not report having formal procedures for identifying and referring trafficking victims to protection services. However, observers reported there was an informal referral mechanism for local police to refer potential child victims to the MoLSA child protection department, which, after reviewing the case, referred children to Taliban-run facilities or to NGOs for assistance. An NGO noted use of the informal referral mechanism improved during the reporting period; however, it remained

inadequate, and services for victims remained severely underresourced. The Taliban acknowledged using *hudud* punishments (corporal punishments for perceived moral crimes), including for engaging in a sexual relationship outside marriage, which discourages sex trafficking victims from reporting exploitation as they are vulnerable to penalization solely for acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Observers noted the Taliban inappropriately penalized victims in cases of sex trafficking. Observers reported *bacha bazi* victims were hesitant to report their exploitation out of fear of punishment from the Taliban and social stigma. In 2021, the Taliban created a “commission for the purification of the ranks,” composed of senior Taliban members, to address complaints of abuses of power, including identifying and demobilizing children among its forces; however, the Taliban did not report identifying or demobilizing any children during the reporting period.

PREVENTION

Afghan ministries and other public sector institutions did not take meaningful steps to prevent trafficking. In addition, the Taliban did not report any efforts to prevent trafficking. The Taliban’s so-called “Deputy Minister of Interior” was responsible for anti-trafficking efforts, and MoLSA, in coordination with security agencies, was responsible for the enforcement of laws related to forced child labor. The Taliban did not report any activities to prevent human trafficking or raise awareness, despite a large number of vulnerable Afghans internally displaced or migrating by irregular means to other countries. The Taliban did not implement measures to prevent children from unlawful recruitment or use in combat and in support roles. During the reporting period, hundreds of thousands of Afghans were deported or returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran. After Pakistan began the implementation of its Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan in October 2023, observers reported the Taliban cooperated with humanitarian actors at border checkpoints and provided returnees from Pakistan with short-term shelter, cash, and other forms of assistance. The Taliban reported inspecting 259 factories in 2023 and identifying 42 cases of child labor; however, it did not share any information on law enforcement efforts or services provided. The Taliban did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Afghanistan, and traffickers exploit victims from Afghanistan abroad. Internal trafficking is more prevalent than transnational trafficking. Traffickers exploit men, women, and children in bonded labor, a form of forced labor by which traffickers offer loans and

manipulate the debts to coerce workers into continued employment, sometimes exploiting entire families in various industries, including brickmaking and carpet weaving. The economic crisis, drought, and food insecurity increases the risk of exploitation by traffickers, particularly in bonded labor, as some take out loans to cover expenses and pay increasing prices to migrant smugglers. Since the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021, vulnerabilities to exploitation continue to intensify, damaging victim support networks, undermining the rights of women and girls, intensifying the refugee crisis, instilling fear in the population, and increasing internal displacement, including forced displacements. IDPs, Afghan returnees, undocumented migrants, those without identification documents, and refugees are at a high risk of exploitation, as are those associated with the pre-August 2021 government and their families. Opium poppy cultivation has plummeted by up to 95 percent because of the Taliban's ban; according to international experts, while this ban may help combat the illicit trade of opium, it significantly increases the vulnerability of populations that have depended on this trade for their livelihoods. In previous years, NGOs confirmed reports of children being used to support opium poppy cultivation and harvesting, as well as drug production and smuggling. Climate change, including slow-onset events like drought and extreme weather, affects agricultural production, increasing irregular migration and vulnerabilities to trafficking. The vulnerability of some communities is further compounded by recent earthquakes in various regions of the country.

Most Afghan trafficking victims are children forced to work in carpet making, brick kilns, domestic servitude, sex trafficking (including *bacha bazi*), domestic work, herding livestock, agriculture, workshops, construction, mining, begging, low-skilled labor, poppy cultivation and harvesting, salt mining, petty crime, drug smuggling, weapons trafficking, truck driving, and in the transportation and hotel sectors. Civil society experts indicate boys are more vulnerable to trafficking than girls, especially in *bacha bazi*. Children, predominantly boys between the ages of 13 and 18, are forced by their families to migrate unaccompanied for work to other parts of Afghanistan or abroad to Türkiye, Iran, or Pakistan to support their families. Some families with large debt, including drug-related debt, "sell" their children to traffickers who require them to work as indentured servants or marry off underage daughters in exchange for a dowry payment; some families force their children into labor with physical violence or knowingly "sell" their children into sex trafficking, including *bacha bazi*. Some families reportedly force their children into street begging through coercion.

The Taliban and other armed groups recruit and use children in combat and support roles. The Taliban often recruits children through coercion, fraud, and false promises. Groups such as ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) and the National Resistance Front use children in direct hostilities to plant and detonate improvised explosive devices, carry weapons, spy, and guard

bases. The Taliban and groups such as ISIS-K forcibly use child soldiers and imprison children associated with other armed groups, including potential trafficking victims. The Taliban recruits children from madrassas in Afghanistan and Pakistan that provide military training and religious indoctrination. The Taliban encourages relatives to send their children to join its ranks to expand its trusted personnel. Armed groups target children from impoverished and rural areas, placing displaced children at a higher risk of recruitment or use by armed groups. The Taliban maintains detention facilities in which it forces detainees, including child and adult sex trafficking victims charged with “moral crimes,” into unlawful prison labor or conditions indicative of forced labor. Prior to August 15, 2021, Afghan security forces and non-state armed groups unlawfully recruited and used children in combat and support roles.

Traffickers exploit young children in *bacha bazi*. Observers report cases of *bacha bazi* by the Taliban and nearly all armed groups. *Bacha bazi* survivors reported to NGOs an “overwhelming understanding that *bacha bazi* is committed by the powerful, including community leaders, and, in previous years, military commanders, police, and government officials of the pre-August 15, 2021, government.”

Restrictions on the movement of and exercise of rights by women and girls, and severely diminished access to employment and education, significantly increase their vulnerabilities to trafficking and drastically increase their risk of child and forced marriage. Woman-headed households and widows are at an increased risk of poverty and vulnerability to trafficking. Freedom of movement for women, including LGBTQI+ women, is largely restricted unless accompanied by a *mahram*. The Taliban detains women without a *mahram* in some provinces, denies some women medical treatment because they are not accompanied by a *mahram*, and subjects some unaccompanied women to beatings. Prior to August 15, 2021, nine out of 10 women in Afghanistan experienced at least one form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime – many of these women have been forced to return to their families after the Taliban closed women’s shelters throughout the country and domestic violence continues to increase. Observers report women are prevented from fleeing abusive situations by punishments imposed by the Taliban for “moral crimes,” increasing their vulnerability to trafficking, as they may seek irregular pathways to escape their situation. The Taliban’s enforcement of the hijab decree exacerbates already strict limitations on the exercise of freedom of movement, and reports indicate the Taliban may be targeting certain ethnic minorities; some women are reportedly apprehended because of false accusations of violating the decree and are subsequently disappeared. Women in Afghanistan may be reluctant to seek help or escape from an abusive situation, including trafficking, because of “honor killings,” which are sometimes carried out by family members. Reports indicate that women and girls may be charged for *Zina* (sex outside marriage) and some may be convicted of *Zina* after

being raped or forced into sex trafficking. International organizations report there is an institutionalization of large-scale and systemic gender-based discrimination and violence against.

According to experts, LGBTQI+ persons are among the most vulnerable to exploitation in Afghanistan because they lack access to social services, are coerced on account of their sexual orientation, or seek informal methods to escape Afghanistan – as they fear passing through checkpoints or going into a passport office. The Taliban attack, sexually assault, and directly threaten LGBTQI+ persons, and many family members and neighbors who support the Taliban take action against LGBTQI+ community members to ensure their own safety. The LGBTQI+ community faces discrimination, violence, and other dangers. The Taliban reported that human rights would be respected within the framework of its interpretation of Islamic law, which would not include LGBTQI+ rights. The Taliban's prohibition on women traveling without a *mahram*, hinders lesbians and bisexual women from escaping exploitative situations on their own.

Members of ethnic and religious minority groups, such as Hazara Shia, Ahmadi Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Bahais, and Christians, are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation because of threats and other dangers they face from the Taliban and other groups, such as ISIS-K. Ethnic and religious minorities are forced to hide in fear or to seek ways to leave the country, putting them at increased risk of exploitation. Muslim Shia populations are targeted by the Taliban and ISIS-K and are at increased risk of trafficking because of displacement and attacks.

Afghan men, women, and children pay intermediaries to assist them in finding employment abroad, primarily in Iran, Pakistan, and Europe; some intermediaries and employers force Afghans into labor or sex trafficking. Many Afghans continue to seek refuge in neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran, many through irregular means. International organizations report hundreds of thousands of Afghans, including tens of thousands of registered refugees, returned or were deported to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran; many of these returnees are vulnerable to trafficking on account of economic instability or other conditions. Some Afghan women and girls who are sold in Afghanistan, India, Iran, and Pakistan are exploited in sex trafficking and domestic servitude by their new husbands. According to an international organization, the dire economic and security situation, political instability, and other factors such as drought in several provinces exacerbates the problem of families selling girls into marriages, including in cases involving Taliban members. Some women and girls are forced into marriage to escape Afghanistan. Afghan boys and men are subjected to forced labor and debt bondage in agriculture and construction, primarily in Iran, Pakistan, Greece, Türkiye, and the Gulf states. Since August 15, 2021, many Afghan refugees fear deportation back to Afghanistan, which makes them less likely to report exploitation to foreign authorities – particularly

in Iran, Pakistan, Türkiye, Europe, and Central Asia. Traffickers in Iran, including Iranian criminal groups, exploit Afghan children in forced labor as beggars and street vendors and in forced criminality, including drug trafficking and the smuggling of fuel and tobacco. Iranian police sometimes detain, torture, and extort Afghan child trafficking victims before deportation. Turkish authorities sometimes beat Afghan asylum-seekers and push them back into Iran where they may face deportation to Afghanistan, and some families are separated in the process. The Iranian government and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps compel Afghan migrants, including children as young as 12 years old, to fight in Iran-aligned militia groups deployed to Syria, including through force and by threatening them with arrest and deportation to Afghanistan. Former Afghan soldiers, hiding from the Taliban in Afghanistan or fleeing to other countries, such as Iran, are at risk of recruitment to fight in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine because of financial instability and threats to their security. Migrant smuggling networks transport Afghan nationals living in Iran to Europe and subject them to sex trafficking and force them to work in restaurants to pay off debts incurred by smuggling fees. Some Afghan traffickers have subjected Afghan boys to *bacha bazi* in Germany, Hungary, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

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