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2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Rwanda

RWANDA (Tier 2 Watch List)

The Government of Rwanda does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. Despite making significant efforts to do so, it did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period. Therefore, Rwanda remained on Tier 2 Watch List for the second consecutive year. Significant efforts included investigating and prosecuting more traffickers, drafting SOPs and an NRM (National Referral Mechanism) for victim identification and referral to care, though they were not finalized by the end of the reporting period, and increasing cooperation with foreign governments on anti-trafficking law enforcement activities. However, the government convicted fewer traffickers. The government identified fewer victims and did not refer any victims to services. Due to inadequate screening, the government did not take effective measures to prevent the inappropriate penalization of potential victims, including children, solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Observers reported children were forcibly and fraudulently recruited as child soldiers for use by March 23 Movement (M23) in combat and support roles.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Increase efforts to investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms.
- Cease coordination with and support to armed groups recruiting or using child soldiers, including in support roles.

- Finalize and adopt SOPs for victim identification and an NRM for referral to care and train stakeholders on their use.
- Increase training for law enforcement and judicial officers on victim-centered approaches.
- Proactively identify trafficking victims by screening for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations, including among victims of violence against women and girls, persons in commercial sex, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, children who are homeless, and refugees and foreign nationals residing at government transit centers.
- Develop and adopt a comprehensive national action plan to combat trafficking and dedicate resources toward its implementation.
- Increase funding for victim protection, including for shelters, and increase availability of services for male victims.
- Hold officials criminally accountable for complicity in human trafficking, including for support to non-state armed groups that forcibly or fraudulently recruit or use child soldiers.
- Develop and implement a centralized database to track the government's anti-trafficking efforts, with data disaggregated by type of trafficking, and train stakeholders in relevant ministries on its use.
- Train prosecutors and judges on restitution in criminal cases and victim compensation for trafficking survivors through civil proceedings.
- Implement and consistently enforce strong regulations and oversight of the labor sector, including training labor inspectors to identify and report trafficking crimes and holding employers or labor recruiters criminally accountable for crimes committed.
- Ensure victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked.

PROSECUTION

The government made mixed anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. The 2018 anti-trafficking law criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking. The law prescribed penalties of 10 to 15 years' imprisonment and a fine of 10 million to 15 million Rwandan francs (\$7,463 to \$11,194), which increased to 20 to 25 years' imprisonment and a fine of 20 million to 25 million Rwandan francs (\$14,925 to \$18,657) if the crime was transnational in nature. The law prescribed penalties of five to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of 5 million to 10 million Rwandan francs (\$3,731 to \$7,463) for labor trafficking crimes. These penalties were sufficiently stringent, and with regard to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. However, the law defined trafficking broadly to include illegal adoption without the purpose

of exploitation, sexual intercourse for the purpose of exploitation, as well as the sale of organs and other body parts.

The government initiated 24 trafficking investigations. This compared with 21 investigations during the previous reporting period. The government prosecuted 58 suspects compared with 19 suspects in the previous reporting period. The government convicted 18 traffickers, compared with 24 in the previous reporting period. Courts sentenced 10 convicted traffickers to unspecified prison terms and fines, two traffickers received prison terms without fines, and information was not provided for the remaining six traffickers. The government did not maintain a standardized law enforcement database on trafficking crimes and did not provide disaggregated sex or labor trafficking data. The government reported cooperating with foreign counterparts on 11 trafficking investigations. Scarce resources, lack of training, limited capacity, and conflation of human trafficking with other crimes continued to hinder overall law enforcement efforts. The government disproportionately focused on transnational trafficking cases and did not take adequate action to address internal trafficking crimes.

The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes. Observers reported border officials accepted bribes and facilitated cross-border trafficking crimes. According to UN reporting, Rwandan officials forcibly and fraudulently recruited children from Rwandan refugee camps for use by M23 as child soldiers in combat and support roles in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The government continued providing material support to and coordinating with the March 23 Movement (M23), a non-state armed group that forcibly and fraudulently recruited and used child soldiers.

The government, with funding from an international organization, trained judges and police officers on anti-trafficking laws and evidence collection. The government, in partnership with an international organization, conducted anti-trafficking training for prosecutors and immigration officials. Observers reported new law enforcement recruits and front-line officials lacked specialized anti-trafficking training. The government signed a MOU with the Ethiopia Federal Police Commission to increase law enforcement cooperation, including on trafficking investigations. The government also signed a MOU with The Gambia Police Force to increase cooperation on transnational crime, including trafficking. The government signed an extradition treaty with the Government of Guinea to improve coordination on extradition cases, including trafficking. In January 2025, Rwanda acceded to the UN Convention Against Cybercrime to combat cybercrime, including trafficking.

PROTECTION

The government made mixed protection efforts. The government identified 58 trafficking victims, compared with 75 victims identified in the previous reporting period. The government did not report referring any trafficking victims to services compared with 60 victims referred in the previous reporting period. The government initiated development of SOPs for victim identification and an NRM to refer victims to services; both remained pending by the end of the reporting period. Observers reported a lack of SOPs and an NRM to identify and refer potential trafficking victims, hindered efforts to identify and assist victims.

The government dedicated close to 402 million Rwandan francs (\$300,000) for victim services, including trafficking, compared with 306 million Rwandan francs (\$228,358) in 2022. The government continued to operate its network of 44 Isange one-stop centers, located in district capitals and hospitals, to assist victims of violence against women and girls and trafficking victims. The centers offered short-term shelter and psycho-social, medical, and legal services and could accommodate children; the government did not report how many trafficking victims it assisted at these centers. The government reported victims would generally stay at the centers for three days, after which victims could choose between longer-term shelter or independent living options. Four shelters affiliated with NGOs and 47 government-affiliated safe houses could also offer medical, psychological, and legal assistance to trafficking victims. Observers reported a lack of specialized shelters for trafficking victims, including long-term shelter, hindered overall protection efforts. The long-term government shelters provided up to six months of services for trafficking and victims of violence against women and girls. The extent and quality of services varied between locations, and social workers did not always screen for trafficking indicators. Foreign national victims were eligible to obtain employment and remain in Rwanda during trial proceedings. The government reported foreign victims had the same access to services as Rwandans. However, sources noted that some vulnerable groups, such as those who fled conflict in eastern DRC, were not eligible to access Isange one-stop centers. The government supported an unspecified number of former child soldiers through the Musanze Child Rehabilitation Center that provided care (medical, psychological support, food, clothing, hygiene) and social reintegration assistance. NGOs offered general assistance and support in refugee camps, but a lack of capacity and resources inhibited the implementation of effective protection, procedures, screening, and assistance to trafficking victims in refugee camps.

The anti-trafficking law stated trafficking victims should not be penalized for their involvement in any unlawful activity that was a direct consequence of being trafficked. However, authorities lacked procedures to identify trafficking victims among populations vulnerable to trafficking. The government continued operating transit centers, which, according to the government, are temporary facilities used for people exhibiting

“deviant behavior that is harmful to the public,” such as “prostitution, drug use, begging, vagrancy, or informal street vending.” Advocacy groups and NGOs previously reported authorities, such as police and the District Administration Security Support Organ, detained vulnerable persons and potential trafficking victims at government operated transit centers – including individuals in commercial sex, adults and children who are homeless, individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation or identity, foreign nationals, and children in street vending and forced begging – and did not adequately screen for trafficking indicators among them. The government held many potential victims of trafficking in these centers, which functioned as de facto detention facilities, for up to six months. While some one-stop centers provided identified victims with psychological counseling, education, vocational training, job placement, and reintegration services, not all centers offered the same services. Rwanda’s Nkamira transit center on the border with the DRC had 2,725 asylum-seekers residing there as of the end of the reporting period and received approximately 15 new arrivals per day.

The government reported having a dedicated budget to repatriate Rwandans overseas. However, observers noted Rwanda’s relatively limited diplomatic presence often made it difficult for Rwandan officials abroad to provide assistance to trafficking victims. Media and NGOs reported victims could receive support packages of 250,000 Rwandan francs (\$187) upon reintegration into their home communities; however, the government did not report providing this assistance to any victims.

The government reported 58 victims participated in investigations and prosecutions. The government reported it provided victim-witness assistance to support participation in criminal justice proceedings by providing protection services such as personal security and access to shelters. The Ministry of Justice also reported funding an NGO to provide legal support to victims participating in criminal justice proceedings. The law protected the identity of victims by allowing court proceedings to be conducted by camera and permitting the use of a video link. The government, in coordination with an international organization, continued operation of a child-friendly space at Isange one-stop Centers, which could provide assistance to trafficking victims participating in court proceedings. Foreign national victims were eligible to obtain employment and remain in Rwanda during trial proceedings. The law allowed victims to obtain restitution in criminal prosecutions, file civil suits against traffickers for civil damages, and stated victims were exempt from paying any associated filing fees. However, no victims received restitution during the reporting period. The government did not maintain a dedicated victim compensation fund. The government did not provide legal alternatives to the removal of foreign trafficking victims to countries where they might face retribution or hardship.

PREVENTION

The government maintained efforts to prevent trafficking. The inter-agency national counter trafficking committee continued to lead national anti-trafficking efforts and convened regularly. In September 2024, the government and an international organization signed a MOU to enhance support for victims, raise awareness, and implement preventive measures against trafficking crimes. The government did not report allocating dedicated funding or resources to implement its expired 2021 NAP; the government reported it continued to draft a new NAP for the second consecutive year. The government, in partnership with other stakeholders, conducted awareness-raising campaigns and continued to use media and radio programs to increase community awareness of trafficking, particularly in schools, including for World Day Against Trafficking in Persons. The Ministry of Justice, in partnership with an NGO and a foreign government, also conducted trafficking awareness activities. The Rwanda Investigation Bureau, Rwanda National Police, and other government agencies continued to operate hotlines for reporting crimes, including trafficking; the government did not report identifying any trafficking victims from hotline calls. In coordination with the government, observers reported NGOs trained government hotline operators on victim-centered approaches for screening and interviewing trafficking survivors. These hotlines accommodated speakers in English, French, Kinyarwanda, and Kiswahili; were advertised in public awareness campaigns on TV, radio, and social media; and were available 24 hours a day.

The government had policies to regulate labor recruitment companies. These policies required their registration with the Rwanda Development Board, licensing from the Ministry of Labor, submission of monthly reports to the government, writing labor contracts in one of the official languages and in a language that both the employee and employer understand, and including salary, date of payment, and dispute settlement procedures in employment contracts. The government did not report efforts to enforce such policies or provide oversight to labor recruitment companies. The government did not permit international labor brokers to operate in Rwanda. The Ministry of Public Service and Labor (MIFOTRA) mandated the creation of committees in public and private institutions to enforce occupational safety and health standards and report suspected forced labor to the police. The government conducted labor inspections and reported findings in the annual inspection report. The government reported labor inspectors and local authorities were trained to identify forced labor; however, sources reported the limited number of inspectors and insufficient funds hindered the government's efforts. The government reported it trained journalists on reporting on human trafficking. The government collaborated with an NGO to research trafficking in Rwanda. Although not explicitly reported as human trafficking, an international organization reported there were allegations of sexual exploitation with trafficking indicators by six UN peacekeepers from Rwanda deployed to Central African Republic (CAR) in

2024. The government made some efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts, including by raising awareness of human trafficking among potential buyers.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

Trafficking affects all communities. This section summarizes government and civil society reporting on the nature and scope of trafficking as reported over the past five years. Human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Rwanda, and traffickers exploit victims from Rwanda abroad. Traffickers subject Rwandan men, women, and children to sex trafficking and forced labor in domestic work, as well as in the agricultural, mining, industrial, and service sectors. Traffickers exploit Rwandan women and girls in forced labor, specifically in domestic service, bars, and restaurants, and exploit men and boys in forced labor in mines and on plantations. NGOs reported cultural norms minimized laborers' rights and consequently made identifying forced labor difficult. Sources reported traffickers used fraudulent marriage contracts to subject victims to trafficking. Child labor, including potential trafficking, in Rwanda is most prevalent in agriculture, illegal mining, and construction.

Traffickers exploit Rwandan adults and children in sex trafficking and forced labor in East Africa, Southern Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Traffickers transited victims through Uganda and Tanzania before reaching final destinations that included African, East Asian, and Middle Eastern countries. Traffickers take advantage of a trilateral immigration agreement to transport trafficking victims across Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda. Observers reported Rwandans are exploited in sex trafficking in karaoke bars and nightclubs in Kenya.

Observers reported some parents receive compensation for allowing traffickers to exploit their children in forced begging. Traffickers target vulnerable populations such as youth, including those who are homeless, orphaned children, children with disabilities, women and girls, adults arrested for commercial sex, unemployed adults, undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons. International organizations reported traffickers entice young girls into domestic servitude and in some cases force them into sex trafficking. Traffickers in neighboring countries continue to pose as labor recruitment agents to recruit and transport small numbers of victims through the country. Traffickers deceive parents with false promises of better opportunities but then exploit children in domestic servitude or child sex trafficking. Traffickers increasingly recruit victims through social media, phone apps and online job portals. Additionally, traffickers may use location tracking features to monitor and control victims' movement.

International organizations reported concerns that children in refugee camps were vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups operating in the

DRC and noted Rwandan children were among those demobilized from armed groups in the DRC. According to UN reporting, the government provided material support to and coordinated with M23, a non-state armed group operating in the DRC that recruited and used child soldiers. During the reporting period, children were allegedly forcibly and fraudulently recruited from Rwandan refugee camps, primarily targeting Congolese, for use as child soldiers by armed groups in the DRC. As of March 2025, Rwanda hosted 135,952 refugees and asylum seekers, mainly from the DRC and Burundi. Refugees fleeing conflict and political violence in Burundi and the DRC remain highly vulnerable to trafficking in Rwanda due to difficulties finding employment and acute food insecurity, and some are exploited by traffickers in other countries after transiting Rwanda. Observers reported that refugee children, particularly girls, orphans, and young people were at greater risk of trafficking. Researchers have reported some parents in refugee camps receive money in exchange for their children's work in domestic service or in the commercial sex industry. Media and NGOs report unscrupulous actors, including Russian officials and illicit recruiters, fraudulently recruited women ages 18-22 from Africa – Rwanda – South Asia, and South America for vocational training programs and subsequently placed them in military drone production sites. Media report workers at these sites are subjected to hazardous conditions, surveillance, hour and wage violations, contract switching, and worker-paid recruitment fees, all of which are indicators of human trafficking. Media sources report that refugees in Rwanda face discrimination and most refugees have limited economic opportunities, which increased vulnerability to trafficking.

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