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2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Ethiopia

Ethiopia (Tier 2 Watch List)

The Government of Ethiopia does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts included prosecuting more potential trafficking crimes; convicting more traffickers; increasing training for law enforcement officials on the distinctions between human trafficking and migrant smuggling; drafting regulations to create a victim protection fund; and conducting awareness campaigns at the federal and regional levels on trafficking indicators and reporting mechanisms. However, the government did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on its anti-trafficking capacity. Corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns, inhibiting law enforcement action. Protection services for victims remained limited and inconsistent in quality, particularly outside of Addis Ababa; additionally, the government continued to rely on civil society organizations to provide most victim services, but it did not provide in-kind or financial support to these efforts. The government continued to disproportionately focus on transnational trafficking crimes and did not take adequate action to address internal trafficking crimes, including domestic servitude and child sex trafficking, despite the scale of the problem. Despite increased trainings, many officials continued to conflate human trafficking and migrant smuggling, hindering the effectiveness of overall anti-trafficking efforts. Government efforts to protect Ethiopian trafficking victims abroad, particularly migrant workers, remained minimal, and protection services for potential victims returning to Ethiopia were inadequate. Therefore Ethiopia remained on Tier 2 Watch List for the second consecutive year.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Continue to increase efforts to investigate and prosecute alleged traffickers, including for both transnational and internal trafficking crimes, and seek significant prison terms for convicted traffickers.
- Expand training to all levels of government, including regional officials outside of Addis Ababa, on implementation of the standard operating procedures (SOPs) for victim identification and the national referral mechanism (NRM) to refer all victims to appropriate care.
- Using the established SOPs, systematically and proactively identify trafficking victims by screening for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations, including individuals in commercial sex, Ethiopian migrant workers returning from overseas, unaccompanied children, and foreign nationals such as Eritreans, Somalis, South Sudanese, and Cuban medical workers, and refer all trafficking victims to appropriate services.
- Develop, adopt, and implement a comprehensive national action plan (NAP).
- Continue to increase training for police, prosecutors, judges, immigration officials, and service providers to differentiate between human trafficking and migrant smuggling.
- Collaborate with NGOs and international organizations to increase the government's capacity to provide long-term shelter and protective services to all trafficking victims, including adult males and foreign nationals.
- Increase protections for Ethiopian trafficking victims exploited abroad, including by providing pre-departure training to all migrant workers, training Ethiopian embassy staff to identify and assist victims, establishing and implementing additional bilateral labor agreements with destination countries, and assigning labor attachés to Ethiopian embassies to monitor migrants abroad.
- Consistently enforce strong regulations and oversight of labor recruitment agencies, including by eliminating recruitment fees charged to migrant workers, holding fraudulent labor recruiters criminally accountable, and training inspectors to report potential violations to the appropriate officials.

- Develop and implement a comprehensive and centralized database to accurately report the government's anti-trafficking statistics and disaggregate data on trafficking crimes and migrant smuggling.
- Improve screening procedures in the distribution of national identification cards and passports to prevent their fraudulent issuance to children.

PROSECUTION

The government increased anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts but did not take adequate steps to address official complicity in trafficking crimes. Proclamation 1178/2020, Proclamation to Provide for the Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and the Smuggling of Persons, as amended by Corrigendum 11/2013, effective as of December 2020, criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking. The law prescribed penalties of seven to 15 years' imprisonment and a fine of 20,000 to 100,000 Ethiopian birr (Br) (\$407 to \$2,040) for labor trafficking and adult sex trafficking and 10 to 20 years' imprisonment and a fine of 30,000 to 100,000 Br (\$610-\$2,040) for child sex trafficking. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with regards to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape.

In 2021, the government provided data from the federal level and six regions, compared with providing data from the federal level and three regions in 2020. The government reported investigating 495 potential trafficking cases—487 for sex trafficking and eight for forced labor—in 2021, compared with 172 investigations in 2020; the government did not disaggregate by type of trafficking in the previous reporting period. Of these 495 case investigations, officials investigated 127 at the federal level and 368 at the regional level, compared with 27 at the federal level and 145 at the regional level in 2020. The government reported prosecuting 387 individuals—353 for sex trafficking, five for forced labor, and 29 for unspecified exploitation—in 2021, compared with 108 prosecutions in 2020. Of the 387 individuals prosecuted, 98 occurred at the federal level, and 289 occurred at the regional level, compared with five prosecutions at the federal level and 103 at the regional level in 2020. Officials prosecuted 267 of these individuals under the anti-trafficking proclamation and 120 under the criminal code. Courts convicted 296 traffickers—289 for sex trafficking and seven for forced labor—in 2021, compared with 48 convictions in 2020. Of the 296 convictions, 190 were under the 2020 anti-trafficking proclamation, and 106 were under the criminal code. The government did not report sentencing data. Courts acquitted eight suspected traffickers during the reporting period for unspecified reasons. For all prosecutions and convictions under the criminal code, the government reported using Article 243 related to unlawful departure, entry, or residence, rather than trafficking provisions. As reported in prior years, officials' propensity to conflate human trafficking and migrant smuggling made it probable that some reported cases involved individuals seeking to illegally cross international borders via irregular migration and other crimes not involving exploitation through forced labor or sex trafficking. Additionally, financial and capacity constraints continued to impede data collection by regional police, and ineffective coordination between the regions and the federal government hindered law enforcement efforts.

The government 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 action during the year. Corruption among police and judicial officials, especially the solicitation of bribes, remained a significant concern. Since the Tigray conflict began in November 2020, international organizations reported armed actors, including Eritrean forces, regional forces, the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), were reportedly responsible for committing human rights abuses and gender-based violence (GBV) in Tigray and other northern regions, including potential trafficking crimes. Observers reported unspecified military personnel and other officials forced women to have sex in exchange for basic commodities and humanitarian assistance. Observers reported officials subjected detained Tigrayan returnees to abuse, forced disappearance, and forced labor upon their return to Ethiopia.

The government maintained the Migration and Human Trafficking Crime Team, which was established in 2019 with 35 investigators and six prosecutors to address both human trafficking and smuggling crimes. The government, in partnership with an international organization, published SOPs for the investigation of human trafficking and migrant smuggling cases to complement the 2020 anti-trafficking proclamation. The government, in partnership with civil society organizations, provided trainings to several thousand prosecutorial and judicial officials, border guards, police officers, and immigration agents on the distinction between human trafficking and migrant smuggling, anti-trafficking laws, victim identification, and international cooperation on investigations. The government reported cooperating with an international law enforcement organization and foreign governments, including Djibouti, Israel, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa, on trafficking investigations.

PROTECTION

The government maintained victim protection efforts. The government reported identifying 329 trafficking victims, compared with zero in the previous reporting period. Of the 329 victims identified, traffickers exploited 289 in sex trafficking and 40 in forced labor; the government reported 191 of the sex trafficking victims and 36 of the forced labor victims were girls, and the remaining 102 victims were unspecified. In previous years, the government reported the number of individuals returning to Ethiopia it considered to be vulnerable to trafficking; the government did not report this number in 2021, compared with more than 14,518 vulnerable migrants in 2020. The government maintained SOPs for proactive victim identification and provided regular trainings on its use; however, officials' dissemination and implementation of the SOPs remained limited.

The government had an NRM outlining guidelines for victim referrals to services; however, its use remained limited, particularly outside of Addis Ababa. In 2021, the government developed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with regional states to expand the NRM's use across the country; the MOU was awaiting regional officials' signatures at the end of the reporting period. The government, in partnership with civil society organizations, reported providing 256 victims—all women and girls—with various services, including medical care, psycho-social counseling, shelter, family reunification, legal aid, and economic assistance; the government did not report protection data related to the remaining 73 identified victims. There continued to be a dearth of care available for male trafficking victims. Despite reliance on civil society organizations to provide most victim services, the government did not report providing financial or in-kind support to such organizations. Officials continued to jointly operate five migration response centers (MRCs), in partnership with an international organization, in Dire Dawa, Metema, Moyale, Semera, and Togochale; the government supported the MRCs in various ways, including by donating land for infrastructure, providing rent-free usage of government facilities, participating in MRC management committees, and facilitating referral linkage with front-line agencies. The government reported providing services to 199 trafficking victims at the MRCs during the reporting period. The government maintained operation of child protection units in Addis Ababa and several major cities. The units reportedly provided protection services to child trafficking victims and vulnerable children intercepted or identified en route from rural to urban areas. The 2020 anti-trafficking proclamation established a fund to support victim protection and care, which could receive funding through a government budget allocation; through fines imposed on, and the sale of, confiscated property from traffickers; and from foreign donors. In 2021, the government drafted regulations to initiate creation of the fund; the regulations were awaiting ministerial-level approval at the end of the reporting period.

To protect Ethiopian nationals exploited abroad, some Ethiopian diplomatic missions in Gulf states continued to provide temporary shelter and facilitate repatriation flights for victims. The government and civil society continued to report that Gulf states conducted mass deportations of Ethiopians—rather than coordinated repatriations—due to pandemic-related stigmatization of migrants and economic impacts among employers. The number of deportations continued at a significant rate, hindering the Ethiopian response system; protection services for returnees, including potential trafficking victims, also remained limited. Officials at Bole International Airport and at land border crossings coordinated with an international organization to screen Ethiopians returning from abroad for trafficking indicators. Observers noted the time allotted for screening interviews—approximately five minutes—was insufficient to identify potential victims, especially amidst the high number of returnees, which an international organization reported was more than 155,000 individuals in 2021.

The 2020 anti-trafficking proclamation provided protections to victims participating in investigations and prosecutions as outlined under the Witness and Whistleblowers Protection Proclamation (No. 699/2010), which included protection from prosecution for crimes committed as a direct result of unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit. The government reported most victims participated in criminal proceedings against traffickers, noting that officials received victims' informed consent. Officials maintained an MOU with NGOs to improve coordination between law enforcement agencies and service providers intended to ensure officials referred victims to appropriate care, including shelter, counseling, and legal assistance, throughout the course of legal proceedings. Courts allowed children to testify against traffickers via video or in child-friendly interviewing rooms. Despite these protections, observers reported, in some cases, victims chose not to testify due to fear of reprisal or lack of funding to travel to court. The government reported the specialized witness protection unit, established in 2018, provided some protection services to victims-witnesses; however, the government did not provide information on specific actions taken by the unit. Proclamation 1178/2020 allowed foreign national victims to receive temporary residence permits or repatriation assistance on an as-needed basis, but the government did not report whether any victims received deportation relief. The anti-trafficking proclamation entitled victims to restitution from convicted traffickers; however, the government did not report awarding restitution during the reporting period. Due to disparate implementation of identification procedures, authorities may have detained or deported some unidentified trafficking victims.

PREVENTION

The government maintained efforts to prevent trafficking. The senior-level National Council (NC), chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, maintained responsibility for the creation of policies and strategies for the prevention of migrant smuggling and human trafficking, and it was mandated to meet twice per year; the NC met once in 2021. The working-level National Partnership Coalition (NPC), which was led by the Ministry of Justice and composed of members from relevant government ministries, religious institutions, civil society organizations, and media, continued to serve as the government's primary coordinating body for issues related to human trafficking and migrant smuggling. The NPC established six working groups, which met regularly throughout the year, related to the following topics: awareness raising and overseas employment, crime prevention and law enforcement, victim protection, data collection, diaspora engagement, and research. The government remained without a comprehensive anti-trafficking NAP for the sixth consecutive year. The NPC launched a 2021-2025 strategic plan, which included activities related to the prevention of human trafficking and migrant smuggling among Ethiopian overseas workers. The government reported seeking input from survivors—including women, children, and persons with disabilities—in developing new anti-trafficking laws, policies, and programs. The government, in partnership with international organizations and foreign donors, conducted various awareness campaigns at the federal and regional levels on trafficking indicators and reporting mechanisms, primarily targeted toward schools, rural communities, religious institutions, and media. The government, in partnership with an international organization, conducted awareness activities related to the prevention of the unlawful recruitment and use of child soldiers in Tigray. The government did not operate a trafficking-specific hotline; however, the government reported referring 151 potential trafficking cases identified through police hotlines to law enforcement and service providers. The government remained without a coordinated national data collection system, resulting in disorganized reporting on information related to trafficking.

In June 2021, the government amended the 2016 employment proclamation through Proclamation No. 1246/2021 Ethiopian's Overseas Employment (Amendment). The revised proclamation newly required the establishment of an employment board, composed of representatives from relevant government agencies, to oversee the implementation of the proclamation, including by facilitating bilateral labor agreements (BLA), protecting migrant workers abroad, and raising awareness of overseas employment processes and risks. The government did not operationalize the board by the end of the reporting period. The employment proclamation continued to require employment agencies to deposit 1 million Br (\$20,350) in a bank as insurance, which officials would use to assist and repatriate trafficking victims; however, the government did not report enforcing this requirement for the third consecutive reporting period. Proclamation No. 1426/2021 newly required migrant workers, not including those employed in domestic work, to pay employment agencies the amount of one month's salary over four payment periods.

The then-Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, now MOLSA, trained 13 labor officers in 2019 to serve abroad as foreign service officers and represent Ethiopians working in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE); however, the government had not yet deployed the labor officers due to pandemic-related travel restrictions. The government reported an international organization provided continued training to the labor officers as deployment remained delayed. The government maintained BLAs with Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to commit to ethical recruitment, legal remedies against those who violated the law, and equal protection of Ethiopian workers, to include equal wages for equal work and reasonable working hours. Ethiopian officials maintained efforts to implement a 2012 law requiring registration of all births nationwide; however, the lack of a uniform national identity card continued to impede implementation of the law and allowed for the continuous issuance of district-level identity cards, which were subject to fraudulent production to exploit potential trafficking victims, including children. The government cooperated with a foreign donor to provide Ethiopian troops with anti-trafficking training prior to their deployment abroad on international peacekeeping missions. Although not explicitly reported as human trafficking, the UN reported one allegation of sexual exploitation with trafficking indicators by one Ethiopian peacekeeper serving in the UN peacekeeping operation in Abyei in 2020; the government did not report investigating the allegation for the second consecutive reporting period. Investigation and accountability actions remained pending for a similar allegation against one Ethiopian peacekeeper serving in the UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia in 2018. The government 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 Ethiopia, and traffickers exploit victims from Ethiopia abroad. Traffickers exploit girls from Ethiopia's impoverished rural areas in domestic servitude and sex trafficking within the country and boys in forced labor in traditional weaving, construction, agriculture, forced begging, and street vending. Brothel owners exploit girls in sex trafficking in Addis Ababa's central market. Labor recruiters frequently target young people from Ethiopia's vast rural areas with false promises of a better life in urban areas; increasingly, traffickers are replicating legitimate app-based recruitment tools to fraudulently recruit vulnerable populations and exploit them in forced labor. Local NGOs assess the

number of internal trafficking victims, particularly children exploited in sex trafficking and domestic servitude, likely exceeds that of external trafficking. As of February 2022, an international organization reported there were more than 4.5 million IDPs in Ethiopia as a result of internal conflict and drought, a substantial increase compared with 1.5 million IDPs in the previous year. Individuals in resettlement camps or otherwise affected by internal conflict and drought are increasingly vulnerable to trafficking due to a lack of access to justice and economic opportunity.

Since November 2020, internal conflict in Ethiopia's northern regions, including Tigray, Afar, and Amhara, has resulted in almost 60,000 Ethiopians seeking asylum in Sudan and other neighboring countries, where protection services are limited; this population is increasingly vulnerable to trafficking as displacement, food insecurity, and lack of economic opportunity persists. International organizations report armed actors, including Eritrean forces, regional forces, the ENDF, and the TPLF, have committed human rights abuses and GBV against women and girls in Tigray, including potential trafficking crimes. Observers report unspecified military personnel and other officials force women to have sex in exchange for basic commodities and humanitarian assistance. Unaccompanied children in conflict areas are vulnerable to unlawful recruitment or use by armed groups.

Trusted community members, known as manamasas, recruit and groom vulnerable youth on behalf of local and international human trafficking syndicates by exaggerating the advantages of working abroad. Scarce economic opportunities and poverty, coupled with familial encouragement, compel thousands of Ethiopians, including a substantial percentage of unmarried individuals younger than age 30, to transit out of Ethiopia via three main routes, where they are vulnerable to trafficking. Undocumented economic migrants primarily take the northeastern route, via Djibouti or Somalia, to Yemen and onward to Saudi Arabia and Europe. The southern route often involves individuals transiting through Kenya and onward to South Africa in hopes of finding work or to connect to onward flights. The northwestern route, the most dangerous and least common, has traditionally been taken by men through Sudan to Libya and onward to Europe; however, observers report an increase in women using this route to reach Khartoum, where they apply for and receive visas to Lebanon. Observers have not been able to discern how these women acquire visas or if the process is legitimate. Across all three of these migration routes, traffickers exploit Ethiopian migrants in sex trafficking or forced labor in transit countries and in their intended destinations. Families often finance irregular migration flows, and parents may force or coerce their children to go abroad. An international organization assesses most traffickers are small local operators, often from the victims' own communities, but well-structured, hierarchical, organized crime groups also facilitate irregular migration flows and likely exploit individuals in forced labor or sex trafficking. International organizations report the number of Ethiopian returnees continues to significantly increase due to pandemic-related economic impacts; more than 155,000 Ethiopians returned in 2021, many of whom likely faced increased trafficking vulnerabilities in their destination country, along their route, and once back in Ethiopia. Observers highlight concerns that officials subject detained Tigrayan returnees, who represented approximately 40 percent of all returnees in 2021, to abuse, forced disappearance, and forced labor upon their return to Ethiopia.

Saudi Arabia remains the primary destination for economic migrants, representing 80-90 percent of Ethiopian labor migration; observers report approximately 400,000-500,000 Ethiopians reside there without valid travel documentation, which increases their vulnerability to traffickers exploiting them in forced labor or sex trafficking. Some Ethiopians arrive in Saudi Arabia through licensed Ethiopian employment agencies but are susceptible to trafficking by employers or illegal employment agencies. The visa sponsorship system—common in Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—binds domestic workers to one employer and prevents their freedom of movement. Some families in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and other Middle Eastern countries exploit Ethiopian women working in domestic service and subject them to physical and emotional abuse. Ethiopian women who migrate for work or flee abusive employers in the Middle East are also vulnerable to sex trafficking. Ethiopian men and boys migrate to Gulf states and other African nations, where traffickers exploit some in forced labor. As a result of the pandemic, Ethiopians abroad—especially in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia—face increased stigmatization and abuse, leading to loss of employment and potential deportation. In Lebanon, employers forcibly removed Ethiopian domestic workers from their homes, leaving them trapped in the country due to pandemic-related travel restrictions, border closures, and economic scarcity; unable to find new work or a safe way home, these individuals are increasingly vulnerable to trafficking. Thousands of Ethiopians—including domestic workers and migrant laborers who lost their employment due to the pandemic, and migrants pushed out by Houthi attacks in Yemen—faced increasing vulnerabilities to trafficking after being placed in abusive detention centers in southern Saudi Arabia. Traffickers exploit Ethiopian girls in domestic servitude and sex trafficking in neighboring African countries, particularly Djibouti and Sudan. Traffickers exploit Ethiopian boys in forced labor in Djibouti as shop assistants, domestic workers, and street beggars, in addition to forcing children to take part in criminal activities. Traffickers exploit Ethiopian women and children in forced begging, sometimes via organized begging rings, in Saudi Arabia. Traffickers exploit Ethiopian woman in forced labor in the hotel industry in Romania.

Ethiopia hosts more than 840,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, the majority of whom are from South Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea. Refugees without education and economic opportunity and those further displaced by conflict are increasingly vulnerable to trafficking. Cuban medical professionals working in Ethiopia may have been forced to work by the Cuban government.

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