

2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Azerbaijan

AZERBAIJAN (Tier 2)

The Government of Azerbaijan 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, Azerbaijan remained on Tier 2. These efforts included convening an anti-trafficking expert workshop and continuing to operate a shelter for trafficking victims and Victim Assistance Centers (VACs) to provide services to victims. Although the government did not report law enforcement statistics, media reported the government increased trafficking prosecutions and convictions. Authorities reportedly continued identifying and referring trafficking victims to services in collaboration with NGOs. However, the government continued to lack screening and proactive identification efforts, particularly for internal trafficking victims among vulnerable populations. Shelter services remained severely underfunded, and the government continued its moratorium on scheduled and unannounced labor inspections, hindering efforts to combat labor trafficking.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Vigorously investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, including complicit officials, which should involve significant prison terms.
- Increase proactive identification efforts, particularly for internal trafficking, forced labor, and child trafficking.
- Implement SOPs and indicators to screen for trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, including individuals in commercial sex, migrants, and children begging, and train officials on their use.
- Allow formal victim identification without requiring cooperation with law enforcement and by entities other than law enforcement officials, including by civil society, social workers, and healthcare professionals.
- Increase partnership with NGO-run shelters providing services to trafficking victims.
- Train investigators, prosecutors, and judges on victim-centered approaches, including on re-traumatization, confidentiality, and specific policies on children.
- Implement a systematic victim-witness assistance program to increase protective services for victims participating in criminal justice proceedings.
- Ensure victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked.
- Lift the moratorium on scheduled and unannounced labor inspections and strengthen the capacity of the Labor Inspectorate to identify and refer victims of forced labor.
- Consistently enforce strong regulations and oversight of labor recruitment companies, including by eliminating recruitment fees charged to migrant workers and holding fraudulent labor recruiters criminally accountable.
- Adopt and implement specific procedures to protect child victims, including identification and referral procedures, indicators, and interview questions.
- Train judges on restitution in criminal cases and inform all identified victims of their right to pursue compensation and encourage them to do so.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts.

The 2005 Law on Combating Trafficking in Persons and Article 144-1 of the criminal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of five to 10 years' imprisonment for offenses involving adult victims and eight to 12 years' imprisonment for offenses involving child victims. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape.

The government did not report law enforcement statistics for 2024. However, media reported the government initiated prosecutions against 14 alleged traffickers and convicted 11 traffickers. This compared with investigating nine new cases, initiating prosecutions of nine alleged traffickers, and convicting 10 traffickers in 2023. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes. The Ministry of Internal Affairs' (MIA's) Anti-Trafficking Department (ATD) investigated most trafficking cases. Authorities often did not recognize psychological coercion as a means of control or required a transnational element for trafficking, which led to internal sex trafficking cases being reclassified as offenses with lesser penalties. Law enforcement noted standard procedures required a complaint from a victim to initiate an investigation, hindering the ability to conduct proactive investigations. Unlike the previous year, the government did not report providing anti-trafficking training to front-line officials. The government did not report cooperating with foreign counterparts on law enforcement activities; however, media reported law enforcement authorities continued cooperating with INTERPOL.

PROTECTION

The government maintained victim protection efforts.

The government did not report victim identification and protection statistics for 2024. However, media reported the government identified 91 victims, including one labor trafficking and 90 sex trafficking victims. This compared with reporting officially identifying 91 victims in 2023 (94 victims in 2022). The government lacked proactive identification efforts for internal trafficking victims, particularly Azerbaijani victims. As a result, most officially identified victims were Azerbaijani victims identified in destination countries or foreign national victims exploited in Azerbaijan. In past years, observers reported police declined to investigate potential forced child begging cases and returned most children to their parents without investigating the family's role in the children's exploitation; this increased the children's vulnerability to revictimization. The government had SOPs for victim identification, and authorities had indicators to screen individuals in commercial sex and other vulnerable communities. However, observers reported first responders, including law enforcement, immigration, and social services personnel, were either unaware of the procedures or did not consistently implement them. GRETA reported a lack of screening of vulnerable populations for trafficking indicators, including women, children, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual in commercial sex, asylum-seekers, and foreign migrant workers. Additionally, the government lacked policies tailored to children, such as interview questions, indicators, and referral procedures. SOPs required first responders to refer potential victims within 24 hours to ATD, which officially identified victims based on an investigation. Although individuals without official victim status could receive government and NGO-provided support services, they did not receive a one-time government-provided allowance and did not have the ability to bring a civil claim against the alleged traffickers.

The government did not report allocating funding for victim assistance or the MIA-run shelter in 2024, compared with allocating 210,161 manat (\$123,625) for victim assistance and 116,161 manat (\$68,330) for the MIA-run shelter in 2023. The government provided some funding to at least one NGO shelter. Observers previously reported NGO-run shelters were severely underfunded, and restrictive legislation governing foreign grants limited NGOs' ability to receive funding from external donors, which resulted in many NGO-run shelter staff working on a voluntary basis.

The MIA operated a shelter for trafficking victims, which provided accommodation, financial assistance, legal assistance, and medical and psycho-social support. The MIA-run shelter could accommodate up to 50 victims and had separate areas for women, men, and children; it was the only accommodation available for adult male victims. The shelter limited freedom of movement and required victims to submit an application to leave the shelter. The MIA-run shelter also accommodated potential victims for up to one month, but longer stays required victims to cooperate with law enforcement. According to media reports, 56 victims received support at the shelter in 2024, compared with 61 officially recognized victims and six potential victims in 2023. Observers also reported the government referred at least 36 victims to NGO-run shelters in 2024. In its 2023 report, GRETA noted the director and most staff members of the MIA-run shelter were NGO workers paid by the government for their part-time work. VACs in Baku and Goychay provided legal, psychological, medical, and employment assistance to officially recognized and potential victims; the government did not report how many victims VACs assisted in 2024, compared with 67 officially recognized victims and 25 potential victims in 2023. The government provided a resettlement allowance of 700 manat (\$410) for officially recognized victims, and media reported 80 victims received the allowance in 2024 (90 in 2023). The government did not report granting temporary residency permits to any foreign national victims (two in 2023).

Due to inadequate screening, the government did not take effective measures to prevent the inappropriate penalization of potential victims solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, such as administrative fines for alleged “prostitution” or immigration violations. Police provided protection to victims staying at the MIA-run shelter, but authorities did not use victim-witness assistance measures for trafficking victims. In past years, police reported difficulties in encouraging victims to cooperate with law enforcement proceedings due to a fear of authorities or retaliation from traffickers. In its 2023 report, GRETA noted courts sometimes held public hearings for trafficking cases which resulted in media outlets publishing victims’ identities and details of their exploitation. The government did not report providing legal assistance to any trafficking victims, compared with 105 victims in 2023. The government allowed video and written statements in prosecutions, but authorities often interviewed victims in the presence of the suspected trafficker, and there was a lack of trauma-informed procedures for child victims. Judges have never issued restitution in criminal cases or awarded compensation in civil suits. The government did not report confiscating property, cash, securities or other assets from traffickers for transferring to its victim assistance fund for the third consecutive year.

PREVENTION

The government decreased prevention efforts.

The National Coordinator (NC) led government-wide anti-trafficking efforts. The government maintained the Interagency Commission (IC) comprising representatives from various ministries and local NGOs to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts; the government did not report whether the IC met in 2024, compared with convening once in 2023. The NC reportedly had a working group that monitored the 2020-2024 NAP’s implementation, but the working group did not report meeting for the second consecutive year. Media reported the government began drafting a new 2025-2030 NAP. The government maintained an anti-trafficking website with information and resources but did not report other public awareness activities. However, according to media reports, the government convened an anti-trafficking expert workshop, including law enforcement, representatives from NGOs and government agencies, and researchers; the workshop focused on increasing awareness and collaboration to combat human trafficking. The government did not report allocating any funding for NGO anti-trafficking efforts, compared with allocating 23,000 manat (\$13,530) to 18 NGOs for various anti-trafficking efforts in 2023. ATD operated a trafficking hotline but did not report the number of calls it received for the second consecutive year. The government did not make efforts to reduce demand for commercial sex acts. The government did not regulate or monitor labor recruitment agencies, nor did it prohibit worker-paid recruitment fees. The government continued a moratorium on scheduled and unannounced labor inspections after a presidential decree in 2015 prevented the Labor Inspectorate from conducting spontaneous

employment inspections, which restricted proactive investigations and victim identification efforts. Although inspectors were permitted to request information from employers and relevant employees in order to investigate complaints, complaint response did not include worksite inspections. The government did not report the number of investigated labor violations, including potential labor trafficking, for the second consecutive year.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

Trafficking affects all communities. This section summarizes government and civil society reporting on the nature and scope of trafficking over the past five years. Human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Azerbaijan, and traffickers exploit victims from Azerbaijan abroad. Traffickers exploit Azerbaijani men and boys in forced labor within the country and in Qatar, Russia, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Traffickers exploit women and children from Azerbaijan in sex trafficking within the country and in Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Malaysia, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Türkiye, and the UAE. In previous years, traffickers exploited victims from China, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan in both sex trafficking and forced labor. Within the country, traffickers exploit children in forced begging and in forced labor as roadside vendors and at tea houses and wedding facilities. Oil workers often work lengthy shifts and at times experience withheld wages and annual leave – potential indicators of trafficking. Previous reports indicate some low-level police solicit bribes from individuals in commercial sex and some brothels operate under the purview of district police chiefs. NGOs report increasing online recruitment, including social media applications, for fraudulent or suspicious jobs abroad.