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2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: United Arab Emirates

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UNITED ARAB EMIRATES: Tier 2

The Government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) 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 to the previous reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore the United Arab Emirates remained on Tier 2. These efforts included expanding law enforcement training on trafficking, increasing oversight of domestic worker recruitment by expanding the number of public-private partnership “Tadbeer” recruitment centers and closing all non-government-regulated recruitment agencies to prevent contract switching and conversion of tourist visas to work visas by unregulated agencies. It also expanded its efforts to raise awareness of labor exploitation and announced new pilot orientation programming for Gulf-bound workers from Africa.

However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The

government did not prosecute any traffickers for forced labor and has not reported convicting any labor traffickers; it also reported fewer convictions for sex trafficking crimes. The government did not routinely employ its proactive identification and referral mechanism, which resulted in the penalization of some potential victims and rendered others without care, specifically those arrested for engaging in commercial sex. In addition, it did not regularly investigate labor law violations that exhibited trafficking indicators—such as cases of unpaid or withheld wages, passport retention, and related abuses—as potential trafficking crimes, addressing them administratively instead of through criminal proceedings.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Increase efforts to prosecute labor trafficking crimes and convict offenders under the anti-trafficking law. • Increase efforts to identify and provide protective services for labor trafficking victims. • Expand trainings to officials across all emirates to better identify potential trafficking cases that originate as labor violations. • Regularly employ standard procedures for victim identification and referral to quality care among foreign workers, particularly women in commercial sex and domestic workers who have fled their employers to ensure authorities do not penalize victims. • Report the number of trafficking investigations and investigate forced labor indicators—such as passport retention, withholding of wages, labor violations reported and identified from inspections, and complaints of abuse—as potential trafficking crimes. • Continue to expand use of the Wage Protection System (WPS) pilot program for domestic workers to ensure all workers are covered under the system. • Execute implementing regulations for and strengthen enforcement of the domestic worker law that expands legal protections for domestic workers. • Increase trainings for shelter staff on how to identify and care for labor trafficking victims. • Strictly enforce prohibitions on withholding workers' passports.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts to address sex trafficking, but efforts to address forced labor remained weak, and data collection was insufficient. Federal Law No. 51 of 2006 and its amendments in Federal Law No. 1 of 2015 criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties ranging

from five years to life in prison, as well as fines ranging from 50,000 to 99,100 UAE dirham (AED) (\$13,610 to \$26,980) and deportation for non-citizens. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. Federal Law No. 10 of 2017 provided additional protections for domestic workers, as well as regulations for recruitment agencies and employers of such workers, including those pertaining to hiring practices, working conditions, and employment contracts. Federal Law No. 10 protected workers' rights to retain their own identity documents but did not stipulate penalties for employers who confiscated workers' passports.

The government did not report statistics on investigations of suspected trafficking cases for the ninth consecutive year. However, during the reporting year the government prosecuted 54 individuals in 19 sex trafficking cases, zero individuals for forced labor crimes, and three individuals in one child forced begging case across the seven emirates, compared with 67 individuals in 38 sex trafficking cases the year prior. Officials reported conviction of 15 sex traffickers and administered sentences ranging from one to seven years' imprisonment, with the vast majority of perpetrators receiving three years or more with additional fines and subsequent deportation at the conclusion of sentences. During the previous year, the government convicted 33 sex trafficking defendants under trafficking laws and handed down similar punishments. The government did not report convicting any labor traffickers during the reporting period and historically has not reported any forced labor convictions. In one specific case during the year, the Dubai Court of First Instance convicted four Bangladeshi men, two Indonesian women, and a Pakistani male for deceiving a female Indonesian domestic worker with a false job offer and subsequently forcing her into commercial sex. After the victim was able to contact family members, who notified the police, law enforcement raided the ring and arrested the alleged traffickers. The court sentenced six of the traffickers to seven years' imprisonment and the seventh trafficker to one year and planned to deport the convicted traffickers at the conclusion of their sentences.

The government did not routinely investigate as possible trafficking crimes violations of Emirati labor laws that exhibited trafficking indicators, such as passport confiscation, delayed or nonpayment of wages, fraud, and contract switching; generally the government treated these cases exclusively as regulatory violations, levying administrative fines or cancelling business licenses in lieu of criminal proceedings. Labor

violations, including those involving forced labor, continued to be addressed by the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization (MOHRE), which administered dispute resolution processes and labor courts instead of specific human trafficking laws. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of officials complicit in trafficking crimes during the reporting year. Relevant authorities including the Ministry of Interior (MOI), Dubai Police, and MOHRE reportedly held a series of lectures and training programs in workers' residences and in recruiting offices to raise awareness on the types of trafficking crimes and ways to communicate with law enforcement authorities and shelters. In October 2020, the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking (NCCHT) and Dubai Police inaugurated the sixth iteration of the "Human Trafficking Specialist" program at the Dubai Judicial Institute (DJI) in collaboration with an international organization; this was a five-week diploma program on ways to detect and prevent trafficking, protect victims, and raise societal awareness of the problem. The program was expanded in 2020-2021 to include 99 participants representing 30 national police authorities, human rights associations, shelters, and federal and government bodies. Additionally, the MOI organized nine training courses, workshops, and lectures related to combating human trafficking crimes, benefiting 918 police members. The Abu Dhabi Judicial Department, in cooperation with the Abu Dhabi Judicial Academy, organized special human trafficking-related courses benefiting 549 judges and members of the Public Prosecution during the reporting year. The Federal Authority of Identity and Citizenship created virtual training programs on forgery detection, combatting human trafficking, and human rights, benefitting 1,362 port and passport inspectors during the reporting period; in addition, the MOHRE sponsored training workshops on UAE labor law and policies that benefitted 337 workplace inspectors. Lastly, the NCCHT facilitated a training program, in cooperation with the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children (DFWAC) and MOHRE, for the staff of a foreign embassy in Abu Dhabi. The program addressed labor rights, human trafficking, and how to properly handle cases and issues related to these topics.

PROTECTION

The government made uneven efforts to protect trafficking victims, as it continued to identify sex trafficking victims and refer them to care but efforts to identify all forms of trafficking, specifically forced labor victims and male victims, remained weak and data

collection remained insufficient. The government identified 23 sex trafficking victims and one child victim of forced begging that were involved in the 19 cases prosecuted during the reporting period, for a total of 24 victims, and referred them to care at government shelters. In addition to the 24 victims that had active court proceedings, which the government identified and referred to care, the Aman Center for Women and Children in Ras Al Khaimah reported assisting 10 sex trafficking victims (one was referred via the hotline) during the year, for a total of 33 sex trafficking victims and one child victim of forced begging. This was compared with 32 sex trafficking victims identified and referred to care during the previous reporting period. The government did not report the number of trafficking victims identified and referred to care that were not involved in active court proceedings. While the government had standard procedures for victim identification among foreign workers, officials did not regularly employ these procedures proactively and continued to rely predominantly on third-party referrals to identify victims, including from foreign embassies, religious institutions, or tips received through government hotlines, smartphone applications, and the internet. Shelter staff and hotlines reported receiving fewer calls and referrals since the start of the pandemic. Authorities continued to implement a formal referral process to transfer potential trafficking victims from detention centers, hospitals, houses of worship, or facilities run by source country embassies or consulates, to government shelters. Shelter staff reported that sometimes law enforcement only referred individuals that were officially determined to be trafficking victims to the shelter, rather than all potential victims. Authorities also sometimes held potential victims who encountered law enforcement first at a transitional center until they could make an official determination of their trafficking victim status. At times, female or male police officers in plain clothes—intended to allay victims’ anxieties—escorted victims, identified by law enforcement, from a government-run detention center to a shelter; however, reports persisted that some victims were unwilling to approach law enforcement officials due to fear of being sent to prison for immigration or other violations rather than being accepted into a shelter. Additionally, some diplomatic contacts and community leaders reported they were hesitant to refer victims of forced labor to shelters, as authorities did not always recognize these crimes as trafficking and rather considered them labor violations.

The shelters were largely funded through individual donations, notably from the ruling family of Abu Dhabi emirate, as well as contributions from public and private companies and religious institutions. The government maintained oversight and funding for shelters

in four of the seven emirates (Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Ras Al Khaimah, and Sharjah), offering housing and assistance for all female and child sex trafficking and abuse victims across the country. The government operated one shelter for men in Abu Dhabi, but it did not serve any male victims during the year. Protective services included medical, psychological, legal, educational, rehabilitation and reintegration, vocational training and certificates, and voluntary repatriation that included prolonged follow-up care after the victim returned home. The government reported the shelters provided 49 training courses, in addition to workshops and lectures to victims and potential victims residing in the shelters during the reporting period. Child trafficking victims and dependents of trafficking victims received services tailored to their needs, including separate living sections and supervisors, as well as teachers who provided age-appropriate educational and psychosocial support. All police departments had a special room for interviewing children and other vulnerable victims. The Philippine, Indian, and Sri Lankan embassies in Abu Dhabi and the Philippine, Indonesian, and Sri Lankan consulates in Dubai provided shelter and other protective services to an unspecified number of nationals who had been subjected to trafficking during the reporting period. Other consulates used “foster families” of the same nationality to host victims until their cases were resolved. During the reporting year, officials distributed 143,614 AED (\$39,100) through the Victims Support Fund to trafficking victims residing at government shelters across the Emirates, which financially supported victims by providing housing and education services, and covering medical expenses, repatriation, or resettlement.

Shelter staff claimed that identified sex trafficking victims were not jailed, fined, or prosecuted for violations committed as a result of their being subjected to trafficking. However, independent observers alleged authorities jailed some potential victims for prostitution offenses, consensual sex outside marriage, or absconding from their employers. MOHRE reported it could reject absconding claims on several grounds, including if the claim was filed for vexatious or fictitious reasons or if the worker already had a pending claim with the government; it also did not force the employee to return to his or her former place of employment. Because the government did not routinely use victim identification procedures or screen for potential trafficking crimes among vulnerable populations, it may have penalized some unidentified victims during the year.

In September 2020, the Dubai Public Prosecution announced an initiative to encourage employers to report their absconded domestic workers to authorities to prevent

employers from hiring illegal workers and reduce losses incurred by employers whose workers flee. Employers could be fined for hiring a worker illegally and could be compensated for filing absconding charges against a worker; employers had 10 days to report absconding workers or risk being fined. This policy may have exacerbated vulnerabilities of some workers attempting to leave exploitative situations, and officials may have penalized potential trafficking victims whose employers filed malicious absconding charges during the year. The government reported it exempted from fines forced labor victims who had overstayed their visas or sex trafficking victims but did not report how many benefitted from this exemption during the reporting period. The government did not provide permanent or formal temporary residency status to victims; however, it permitted victims to stay in shelters and participate in court proceedings, and worked with international organizations to resettle, in third countries, victims who could not return to their countries of origin. Interior officials could amend the status of victims to assist them in seeking follow-on job opportunities in the UAE. Laborers whose employer had not paid them for 60 days were entitled to legally remain in country and search for a new employer. The government reported it provided repatriation assistance to trafficking victims who wished to return to their home countries but did not report a total number of victims that were repatriated during the reporting period. Shelter staff noted they assisted an unknown number of trafficking victims in finding new employment or sponsors on an ad-hoc basis. The government encouraged victims to assist in the investigation and prosecution of traffickers and provided victim-witness protective services, including private interview rooms, free legal counseling, and safe transportation to court hearings. Police took counter-retaliation measures and prohibited communication between the victim and suspect. Police also enforced two governmental decrees aimed at ensuring the media adhered to victims' privacy and that shelters adequately protected victims. According to the NCCHT, victims were informed and assured of their rights when giving testimony. During the reporting period, the government established a Witness Protection Program by expanding Federal Law No. 14 of 2020, which gave judicial officials the authority to enroll witnesses in the protection program to keep their identities confidential during legal proceedings; the government did not report if any trafficking victims were enrolled in the program during the year. Both police and shelter representatives reported victims often chose immediate repatriation at the UAE's expense rather than remaining in country to testify against alleged traffickers or see a case through to final adjudication.

PREVENTION

The government increased efforts to prevent trafficking. It increased oversight over domestic worker recruitment through Tadbeer Centers, continued to incorporate domestic workers in the WPS through a pilot program, expanded its awareness raising activities, and launched a pilot program with the Government of Saudi Arabia and the African Union to provide orientation programming to African workers bound for the Gulf. The government continued to carry out its national action plan to address trafficking, driven chiefly by the NCCHT. The plan focused on prevention, protection, prosecution, punishment, promotion of international cooperation, redress, rehabilitation, reintegration, and capacity building. In July 2020, the NCCHT met to review implementation of its anti-trafficking programming and the impact that the pandemic had on human rights issues overall in the Emirates; the entity subsequently published a public report outlining its findings that included recommendations to ensure workers' rights were protected during the pandemic to mitigate increased risk of exploitation for workers that had experienced job loss, non-payment of wages, or loss of legal status. In October 2020, the UAE hosted the second annual Anti-Trafficking Forum in the Middle East focusing the efforts of participating governments on preventing pandemic-related vulnerabilities for workers, increasing protections for victims, and strengthening transparency in foreign worker recruitment processes to mitigate potential exploitation.

The government amplified awareness on trafficking by continuing to post informational notices at airports, implement training courses for high-risk groups, and disseminate publications in various languages directed at the most at-risk communities, effectively reaching tens of thousands of individuals during the year. The campaigns raised awareness of penalties for trafficking and publicized hotlines for more information or direct assistance. Airport banners specifically targeted terminals based on nationalities with high workforce numbers in the UAE. The government educated passengers at Dubai International Airport (DXB) about trafficking through clips, broadcasts, flyers, and tactically situated massive banners in nine prominent languages. In October 2020, Dubai government-owned Emirates Airline began showing an informational film about human trafficking on all flights via its inflight entertainment system. Dubai Police, NCCHT, and DXB, in partnership with an international organization, continued its two-year campaign that began in July 2019 entitled "Don't Turn a Blind Eye." The campaign aimed to raise awareness of airport employees and travelers on how to detect trafficking crimes. In

addition to workshops for airport employees, the campaign also publicized information on screens in DXB to educate travelers on how to identify potential trafficking victims. During the reporting period, the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children and the Aman Shelter for Women and Children co-produced a series of leaflets to inform vulnerable populations of domestic abuse and trafficking risks, which the organizations translated into 10 languages and distributed online and via social media. The Aman Shelter also reported producing a training film on workers' rights, trafficking, and domestic abuse that was shown to all domestic workers employed through Tadbeer Centers—recruitment centers for domestic workers—in Ras Al Khaimah. Shelter staff continued a partnership with art galleries for visual art exhibits that showcased art made by trafficking victims, to both increase awareness and raise funds for other victims. During the reporting period, the Federal Public Prosecution published an awareness brochure on social media outlining the penalties against individuals who knew of the commission of human trafficking crimes but failed to inform the competent authorities; the brochure was viewed more than 5,600 times. The MOI, in cooperation with health, social, and legal bodies, organized 20 lectures, workshops, and education seminars benefiting 6,420 workers across the UAE. Additionally, the Abu Dhabi Police worked with media outlets to warn job seekers about fraudulent internet employment ads that emerged as a result of increased unemployment due to the pandemic and cautioned laid-off workers to be cognizant of fraudulent job offers that charged recruitment fees, which is an illegal practice in UAE.

The government funded and ran a 24-hour toll-free hotline for reporting cases of trafficking, delayed wage payments, or other labor violations, which operated in Arabic, English, Hindi, Russian, Tagalog, and Urdu. Calls were categorized and automatically alerted police in suspected trafficking cases. Additionally, MOHRE, MOI and DFWAC had dedicated multilingual toll-free hotlines; MOI continued to host a mobile phone application that allowed users to access certain police services on their phones, and victims of trafficking or witnesses to the crime could use the application to file reports as well. In Dubai, law enforcement authorities ran a separate line, and UAE-wide there remained a 24-hour toll-free number for migrant laborers to vocalize workplace complaints or general inquiries. Analogous to the year prior, the government did not report how many trafficking or trafficking-related calls any hotline received, how many victims were identified, or how many investigations were initiated during the reporting year.

Officials continued to employ public-private partnership recruitment centers for domestic workers, known as Tadbeer Centers, mandated to regulate the recruitment and training of domestic workers, educate them on their legal rights, resolve employer-employee disputes, and verify worker accommodations for compliance with domestic worker law minimum standards. Each center was equipped with a room solely for grievance mediation, with a video connection to MOHRE for official oversight. In practice, however, these centers were inhibited as they were not generally able to enter or inspect private homes. The centers were integral to the movement of domestic worker recruitment from the Ministry of Interior to MOHRE, a change aimed at improving recruitment regulation and standards. NGOs continued to raise concerns about the ease with which tourist visas could be converted into work visas for workers looking to circumvent their home countries' recruitment ban in the UAE—a practice that exacerbated the risk of trafficking for these workers, as they often paid fees to multiple recruitment agencies in both their home countries and in the UAE and had no protection under UAE law when they arrived on tourist visas. Furthermore, some workers were unable to switch their visas to employment visas and so continued to work illegally, heightening their vulnerability to exploitation. In January 2021, media reported that dozens of Filipina workers who had been promised jobs in the UAE and had entered the country on 30-day tourist visas facilitated by two private recruitment agencies in the Emirates were confined against their will upon arrival until their tourist visas expired; the workers were then transported to Syria to work as domestic workers and subjected to conditions of forced labor, including physical and sexual abuse and non-payment of wages. In a purported effort to address this practice and solely use Tadbeer Centers for the recruitment and regulation of all domestic workers, the MOHRE announced the closure of 250 private recruitment agencies in January 2021; agencies had the option to obtain a Tadbeer license, switch to another sector or shut down by March 2021. In the past, these private recruitment agencies were accused of violating labor and immigration laws and failing to guarantee the rights of workers and employers, but they were popular as their services were viewed as cheaper, more flexible and more accessible than those offered at Tadbeer Centers. MOHRE reported that it was working with Tadbeer Centers to lower their operational costs and revise their fees to make them more competitive and starting in March 2021, citizens and residents would be required to hire domestic workers through Tadbeer Centers, an effort to ensure that all domestic workers were recruited through government regulated mechanisms and therefore were protected under the domestic worker law. At

the close of the reporting period, 56 Tadbeer Centers were operational across the Emirates, an increase from the 23 Centers that were operational at the end of the previous reporting period.

The government implemented Federal Law No. 10 of 2017 to improve the work conditions and welfare of domestic employees and adopted Cabinet Resolution No. 22 of 2019, which granted domestic workers the right to terminate their employment if an employer failed to meet contractual obligations such as payment of wages, or if the employee was subject to sexual harassment or physical or verbal abuse by the employer. The government did not strengthen regulatory enforcement of in-home inspections and workplace grievance resolution. In addition, sociocultural and legal barriers against government interference with private households continued to hamper monitoring and enforcement efforts of its domestic worker law. This law included the right for employees to retain personal documents, sign standardized contracts with unequivocally designated working conditions, access specialized tribunals for settling workplace grievances, and observe mandatory time off. It also stipulated in-home inspections on the basis of complaints or reasonable evidence of law violations. Under the law's provisions, a recruitment agency or person who hindered law enforcement, anyone who disclosed information unveiled in an investigation, or anyone who facilitated the abandonment of a domestic worker may be jailed for a minimum of six months and ordered to pay a 10,000 to 100,000 AED (\$2,720 to \$27,230) fine. Expatriate workers were granted the freedom to leave and switch employers at any time without employer approval through Ministerial Decree No. 765 and 766 of 2015; however, this decision included the requirement that the worker had to provide between one and three months' notice, depending on the initial contract terms to leave an employer. According to the NCCHT, 319,655 workers changed employers during 2020. As with domestic workers, in instances where an expatriate employee faced physical or verbal abuse or sexual harassment, the worker had the freedom to leave the employer without notice. All workers were able to terminate employment at any time in the absence of abuse or a contractual breach but may be required to forego certain benefits including end of service gratuity and a return ticket to their home country. In those instances, a domestic worker may have had to pay their employer compensation equal to one month's wages and other entitlements deemed necessary by a court. In such instances, MOHRE could issue the domestic worker a new work permit to move to a new employer; the domestic worker was not subject to immediate deportation if they terminated employment, to ensure the

worker had sufficient time to find a new job. Most workers chose to remain in the UAE to work for another employer under a new work permit or contract after terminating their previous employment.

MOHRE primarily oversaw, regulated, and enforced labor-related complaints. Efforts by MOHRE to combat forced labor across the UAE included an extensive labor inspection program that incorporated routine and unannounced inspections of company housing and work sites by a team of full-time labor inspectors, in addition to seven dedicated anti-trafficking inspectors. Authorities generally dealt with labor law violations administratively and did not report investigating such cases for trafficking indicators or referring any for criminal prosecution. Moreover, the NCCHT reported that the government conducted 280,728 inspection visits in 2020 but did not report how many labor law violations were identified via those inspections, and if any were referred for further investigation or criminal prosecution as potential trafficking cases. The government continued its monitoring and inspection program for regulation of private sector laborers, including through the WPS, which electronically monitored salary payments via vetted banks, currency exchanges, and financial institutions for all onshore companies employing more than 100 workers (95 percent of the private sector workforce). The WPS automatically flagged delayed salary payments of more than 60 days or payments that were less than contractually agreed upon, and after a designated period, authorities administered fines and other enforcement actions. MOHRE reported that letters were issued to companies irrespective of their size and owner and sent to the Public Prosecutor for WPS violations; the ministry also reported that cases were not dropped until the missing wages were paid and the company was up to date with all salary payments. For the 13th consecutive year, the government did not report the number of complaints of unpaid wages it investigated as a result of its dispute resolution process or the WPS, which were intended to ensure workers were paid according to their contracts and not subjected to forced labor.

The NCCHT reported that the government issued 8,181 fines to companies that failed to provide payments to workers via the WPS in 2020 but did not report investigating such cases for trafficking indicators or referring any for criminal prosecution. Workplace grievances routinely resulted in fines, suspended permits to hire new workers, or the cancellation of business licenses though, apart from the number of fines issued to companies in violation of the WPS, the official number and specifics of other punishments were unknown. Media and diplomatic sources continued to report that

some companies retained workers' bank cards or accompanied workers to withdraw cash, coercively shortchanging the employees even though the WPS showed the proper amount paid. Such cases were difficult to prove in labor courts, given the WPS documented accurate payments via designated bank accounts. Furthermore, domestic worker salaries were not required to be paid via the WPS; this, coupled with cultural norms and the lack of legal provisions requiring inspections of domestic worker accommodations, wage payment and work hour abuses, among other acts indicative of forced labor, rendered domestic workers vulnerable to exploitation. However, the government continued its pilot program from the previous reporting period to incorporate domestic workers into the WPS, and in July 2020, MOHRE signed an agreement with First Abu Dhabi Bank (FAB) to integrate these workers under the system. The NCCHT reported that the pilot program integrated 423 domestic workers in 2021; overall, however, less than one percent of domestic workers were enrolled in the WPS at the close of the reporting period. In practice, the system facilitated monthly salary payments and monitored payments for timeliness and transparency, and domestic workers received earnings into accounts that could be accessed through issued debit cards provided to workers. The NCCHT reported that although the enrollment of domestic workers under the WPS was currently voluntary, the renewal of domestic worker permits will make enrollment mandatory, with the intent that all domestic workers will be integrated under the WPS in 2022. The government did not enforce a prohibition on employers withholding workers' passports, which remained a pervasive problem and left workers vulnerable to exploitation and potentially trafficking.

In January 2021, the government announced a partnership between the UAE, Saudi Arabia and the African Union to pilot and implement an orientation program for Gulf-bound workers from Africa. During the previous reporting period, the UAE and Government of the Philippines signed a trafficking-specific memorandum of understanding (MOU), which adopted procedures and created a joint taskforce to combat the crime as well as share best practices, exchange information, promote human rights, and provide assistance in the protection, repatriation, recovery, and rehabilitation of trafficking victims in accordance with domestic laws. Since 2014, the Government of the Philippines banned the recruitment of domestic workers to the UAE; however, in March 2021, the two governments agreed to additional protections for Filipino domestic workers that lifted the suspension. These protections included ensuring domestic workers were given a standard employment contract, remained in possession of their

passports and mobile phones (employers would be banned from holding them), got eight hours of sleep a day, one paid day off per week, and the right to hold a bank account; additionally, the Philippine's Embassy in the UAE would be notified if a Filipino national sought to change a tourist visa to a work visa. In addition to the government's MOUs with Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Gambia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand, Uganda, and Vietnam to regulate recruitment mechanisms and prevent contract switching, in 2020, the UAE and the Government of Belarus signed an MOU to increase cooperation on trafficking issues. Further, the government also held the second bilateral meeting of the task force responsible for implementing the MOU between India and the UAE on cooperation to prevent and combat trafficking. The government did not report any specific results of any of these MOUs during the reporting period. The government did not take measures to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts in the UAE. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintained provision of workshops and awareness programs on human trafficking for its diplomatic personnel.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit foreign victims in the UAE. Foreign workers comprise nearly 90 percent of the UAE's population and are recruited globally. Lower wage labor, including most manual labor and a significant portion of the service sector, is provided almost entirely by migrant workers predominantly from South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East, with a growing percentage from East and West Africa. It is not uncommon for employers to subject some of these workers to conditions indicative of forced labor, such as passport retention, non-payment of wages and unpaid overtime, restrictions on movement, contract switching, fraudulent employment promises, substandard food and housing provisions, or a failure to meet other contractual agreements. Adults from some of these countries travel willingly to the UAE to work as domestic workers, security guards, drivers, gardeners, massage therapists, beauticians, hotel cleaners, or elsewhere in the service sector, but traffickers subject some of them to forced labor or sex trafficking after arrival. Reports indicate the UAE serves as a trafficking hub where recruiters sell migrants to families who subsequently illegally transport them to other countries in the Gulf. The UAE has in recent years become a primary destination for Ugandans seeking employment as domestic workers and security guards. Many Pakistanis are reportedly hired on promises they will receive handsome

salaries, medical benefits, and accommodations, but after reaching the UAE the promises go unfulfilled, with some Pakistanis discovering that the companies that hired them are fraudulent. For expatriate workers and domestic workers especially, the *kafala* or sponsorship system in the UAE restricts their ability to leave a position without prior notice. Despite legal measures allowing workers to change sponsors or terminate their employment, some employers continue to exercise unilateral power over foreign workers' movements, deny laborers working illegally the ability to change employers, restrict permission for them to leave the country, and threaten employees with abuse of legal processes, which heightens their vulnerability to trafficking. Traffickers subject some women, predominantly from Central Asia, South and Southeast Asia, East Africa, Eastern Europe, Iraq, Iran, and Morocco, to sex trafficking in the UAE, and most trafficking cases registered in the UAE are classified as sexual exploitation despite significant labor trafficking concerns. Per media sources, some cases of child sex trafficking involve traffickers forging ages on passports to facilitate undetected entry into the UAE. Other reporting claims recruiters in some source countries work as individual agents rather than for regulated companies, complicating law enforcement and monitoring efforts.

Although illegal under UAE law, many source-country labor recruiters charge workers exorbitant fees in their home countries (outside of UAE jurisdiction), causing workers to commence employment in the UAE owing debts in their respective countries of origin, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking through debt-based coercion. Despite UAE law to prevent the practice, reports of employers engaging in the practice of contract-swapping persist, leading to less desirable and lower paying jobs for laborers post-arrival in the UAE. Traffickers often recruit victims from the large foreign population already in the country; they may deceive or compel a migrant worker in the UAE, willingly on a tourist or work visa, into forced labor or sex trafficking. Additionally, some laborers enter the UAE on tourist visas and start working for an employer who subsequently opts to not change the tourist visa to a work visa in order to grant legal residency, a common method of exploitation. However, due to pandemic-related border closures and travel restrictions both in the UAE and in other countries, the use of tourist visas as a method to circumvent immigration and labor laws lessened, and traffickers reportedly focused on targeting workers inside of the UAE instead. During the reporting period, workers experienced pandemic-related job loss, non-payment of wages, and movement restrictions, which heightened their vulnerability to trafficking. These vulnerabilities,

coupled with the halt in the government issuing new work permits from March to October 2020, led to an increase in traffickers using illegal online markets on social media to advertise and sell domestic workers already residing in the country. Following the temporary suspension of Tadbeer Centers—the government’s regulated, privately-run domestic recruitment centers—due to the pandemic, some employers sponsoring domestic workers used online platforms to advertise the selling of domestic workers. According to UAE shelter staff, migrant workers will sometimes start with one employer and for various reasons, including abuse or exploitation, low salary, or simple dissatisfaction with the job, will follow alternate employment opportunities that ultimately prove fictitious, as traffickers in the UAE are adept at using manipulation to entice laborers with fraudulent higher salaries. During the year, traffickers also targeted workers already residing in the country who had experienced pandemic-related job loss with false promises of better jobs through online platforms. Cuban nationals working in the UAE may have been forced to work by the Cuban government.

During the reporting year, there were no allegations the UAE recruited, used, or detained any child soldiers, and in September 2019, the UAE reportedly ceased providing direct support to Security Belt Forces in Yemen who allegedly recruited and used child soldiers. In June 2020, the UN Secretary-General delisted the Saudi-led Coalition in Yemen from the annexes of the UN report on Children and Armed Conflict. During a previous reporting period, an international organization alleged the government, a member of a multi-nation coalition that commenced military operations against Houthi rebel forces in Yemen in 2015, provided training and coordinated operations with the Security Belt Forces, Hadhrami Elite Forces, and Shabwani Elite Forces—proxy militias fighting Houthi forces and terrorists in Yemen that allegedly recruited and used children as soldiers. Media also previously reported officers associated with Sudan’s Rapid Support Force took bribes from families to permit children to serve as combatants in Yemen during that reporting year. Emirati officers supposedly trained and commanded some Sudanese combatants during the previous reporting period. While the UAE did not directly commission those forces, there were Sudanese units under the Saudi-led Coalition fighting with Emirati and Yemeni government forces during those years.

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