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Trafficking in Persons Report 2017 - Country Narratives - Lebanon

LEBANON: Tier 2

The Government of Lebanon does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period; therefore, Lebanon remained on Tier 2. The government demonstrated increasing efforts by prosecuting and convicting more traffickers and identifying and referring to protective services an increased number of victims. The government continued to partner with NGOs to provide essential services to victims, and it took proactive steps to address the demand for commercial sex acts and prevent incidents of sex trafficking. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government did not directly protect victims nor implement victim identification and referral procedures, which resulted in authorities arresting, detaining, and deporting trafficking victims among vulnerable groups for crimes committed as a direct result of being subjected to trafficking. Moreover, Lebanon's sponsorship system, which places a significant amount of power in the hands of employers of foreign workers, remained a significant impediment to authorities identifying and protecting trafficking victims.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEBANON

Ensure trafficking victims are not arrested, detained, deported, or prosecuted for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being subjected to trafficking, such as immigration or prostitution violations; screen all detained domestic workers for potential trafficking victims in detention centers; take steps to establish greater oversight over *artiste* visa holders allowed in the country, a program that contributes to the vulnerability of women to sexual exploitation; increase investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of offenders under the anti-trafficking law, and investigate employers and recruitment agents who withhold workers' passports, travel documents, or wages for potential trafficking crimes; implement procedures to identify and refer to protection services trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, such as illegal migrants, women holding *artiste* visas, domestic workers, and Syrian refugees; continue to work in partnership with NGOs to screen for, identify, and provide protection services to victims, including witness support during criminal proceedings; provide training for judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officials, and diplomatic personnel about the crime of trafficking and application of the anti-trafficking law; prohibit and penalize the withholding of workers' passports and travel documents, and reform the sponsorship system to ensure workers are not bound to abusive employers and allow workers, including *artiste* visa holders, freedom of movement; formally establish the victim assistance fund; adopt and implement the draft national action plan; and enact the labor law amendment extending legal protections to foreign workers and the draft law providing increased labor protections to domestic workers.

PROSECUTION

The government increased its law enforcement efforts. The 2011 anti-trafficking law prohibits all forms of human trafficking. Prescribed penalties for sex trafficking and forced labor range from five to 15 years imprisonment, which are sufficiently stringent and commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. Nevertheless, government officials and NGOs reported most judges lacked understanding of the anti-trafficking law and knowledge of best practices for handling trafficking cases. The government lacked a law that prohibited or penalized confiscation of workers' passports or travel documents by employers or labor agents.

In 2016, the internal security forces (ISF) anti-trafficking unit investigated 20 cases of suspected trafficking, involving 87 victims of sexual exploitation and child trafficking, and referred 26 suspected traffickers to the judiciary; this was an increase from 14 ISF investigations in 2015. The directorate of general security (DGS) investigated 51 potential trafficking cases, the same as in 2015. Among the 51 cases, 14 involved *artiste* visa holders and four were referred to judicial or law enforcement authorities for further investigation. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) reported the public prosecutor's office referred to investigative judges 98 alleged traffickers for further investigation; investigative judges charged and prosecuted 71 of these individuals, resulting in 33 convictions under the anti-trafficking law during the reporting period. These cases involved forced prostitution, forced labor of children and adults, including forced child street begging. Among these cases, four individuals received sentences ranging from five to 10 years imprisonment for sex trafficking and three individuals received sentences ranging from two to 15 years imprisonment for forced child begging. Despite these efforts, officials generally sought to resolve trafficking cases involving foreign workers through mediation between the employer and worker, rather than refer them for criminal prosecution. Additionally, government officials continued to report security forces were reluctant to arrest parents for trafficking their children due to a lack of social services available should the child be removed from the family. The government did not report investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government officials complicit in human trafficking offenses during the reporting period; however, NGOs continued to report a common perception that DGS officers accepted bribes to protect adult nightclubs or issue *artiste* visas.

DGS established an anti-trafficking unit within its human rights department in November 2016. The government did not directly provide anti-trafficking training for officials, but it encouraged officials to participate in trainings provided by NGOs. The army continued to require anti-trafficking training for soldiers, while widely distributed military publications featuring articles on human trafficking to raise awareness among military officers.

PROTECTION

The government increased efforts to identify and refer trafficking victims to protection services and continued to work with NGOs to provide services to victims; however, victims remained highly vulnerable to punishment for crimes committed as a direct result of being subjected to trafficking. The government did not formally adopt draft procedures for the identification and referral of victims to NGO services; in practice, officials continued to identify and refer trafficking victims to care on an ad hoc basis. During the course of investigations in 2016, the ISF identified 87 victims of sex trafficking and child trafficking, 46 of whom were referred to NGO-run shelters; this was an increase from 78 victims identified in 2015. The government did not directly provide protection services to trafficking victims but continued to work in cooperation with NGOs to provide essential victim services. A longstanding MOU between the government and an NGO required DGS to refer victims to an NGO-run safe house and provide security for the location. In 2016, the safe house assisted 226 trafficking victims, 14 of whom the government referred. In 2016, the MOJ signed contracts with two NGOs to provide protection services for at-risk youth, including child trafficking victims. The Ministry of Social Affairs also signed contracts with NGOs for the NGOs to provide protection to vulnerable children.

The government continued to arrest, detain, or deport victims for crimes committed as a direct result of being subjected to human trafficking, such as domestic workers who fled abusive employers, out-of-status migrant workers, women holding *artiste* visas, and persons in prostitution, without screening these vulnerable persons for trafficking. Women holding *artiste* visas were subject to immediate deportation upon arrest for prostitution violations, and foreign workers without valid residence and work permits were subject to detention for one to two months—or longer in some instances—followed by deportation. Some children involved in criminal activity, who may have been trafficking victims, faced arrest and prosecution. Authorities also detained foreign domestic workers for violating the terms of their work contracts or visas in a new 750-person detention center, which opened in August 2016. However, the DGS actively worked to identify trafficking victims and permitted an NGO to screen for victims in the new and old detention centers; the NGO identified six victims in the new detention center during the reporting period. The NGO also continued to report an increased level of professionalism and sensitivity among DGS officials and investigators. The government did not adopt the draft labor law amendment extending legal protections to foreign workers nor the draft law to increase labor protections for domestic workers.

Officials did not encourage victims to file criminal charges against their traffickers, although victims were permitted to file civil suits. Victims were allowed to reside in Lebanon during an investigation of a trafficking case upon a judge's decision, but the government did not report if any judges issued such a decision during the reporting period. The government did not provide legal redress for victims who chose voluntary repatriation because they were not present in the country to testify against their traffickers. NGOs reported foreign victims prefer quick administrative settlements followed by repatriation rather than long criminal prosecutions because of the lack of protection services during the criminal proceedings. The anti-trafficking law stipulates that money earned from trafficking crimes will be confiscated and deposited into a special fund to assist trafficking victims, but the government had not issued an implementing decree to create such a fund. The government did not provide temporary or permanent residency status or other relief from deportation for foreign trafficking victims who faced retribution or hardship in the countries to which they would be deported.

PREVENTION

The government sustained efforts to prevent trafficking. In April 2016, the ISF closed 13 unlicensed brothels, and a judge issued a permanent judicial order to close all "super nightclubs"—which operate as brothels—in Jounieh city, which was a well-known location for multiple nightclubs of this type. The national anti-trafficking steering committee continued its monthly meetings throughout 2016. The government did not adopt the draft national anti-trafficking action plan, but relevant ministries continued to take efforts to implement the plan. The government did not organize any anti-trafficking public awareness campaigns during the reporting period. DGS and MOL continued to operate hotlines to receive complaints,

including for trafficking crimes, but the government did not report how many trafficking victims were identified through these hotlines; anecdotal reports suggest employers use the MOL hotline to file complaints against foreign domestic workers rather than report potential cases of trafficking. DGS continued a program to inform *artiste* visa holders about restrictions and obligations of their visa status upon arrival to Beirut International Airport. Under the program, if the visa holder objects to the visa's terms, she is free to return to her home country. The government made efforts to reduce the demand for forced labor. MOL closed 36 employment agencies for committing employment violations against foreign workers in 2016, and maintained a blacklist of an unknown number of recruitment agencies for committing fraudulent recruitment practices; however, the government did not report prosecuting any recruitment or employment agencies for potential trafficking crimes. The MOL and ISF continued to require Syrian nationals to hold work permits in order to work in the formal sector, which bound these refugees to their employers. However, the government eased the ability of UNHCR-registered refugees to work in three sectors without any work permit—agriculture, sanitation, and construction. The government also waived the fee for residency permit renewals, increasing the number of Syrians legally in the country, allowing them to move about more freely, and allowing them to seek employment opportunities. The government did not take steps to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts or address child sex tourism by Lebanese nationals abroad. The government did not provide anti-trafficking training for its diplomatic personnel.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, Lebanon is a source and destination country for women and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking and a transit country for Eastern European women and children subjected to sex trafficking in other Middle Eastern countries. Women and girls from South and Southeast Asia and an increasing number from East and West Africa are subjected to domestic servitude in Lebanon, facilitated by recruitment agencies that at times engage in fraudulent recruitment. Under Lebanon's sponsorship system, foreign workers who leave their employers' houses without permission forfeit their legal status, increasing their vulnerability to re-trafficking. Lebanese government officials and NGOs report most employers withhold their workers' passports, putting workers at risk of trafficking. Women from Eastern Europe and North Africa enter Lebanon to work in the adult entertainment industry through Lebanon's *artiste* visa program, which sustains a significant commercial sex industry and enables sex trafficking; 11,284 women entered Lebanon under this program in 2016, more than double the number of women that entered under this program in 2015. The terms of the *artiste* visa prohibit foreign women working in adult nightclubs to leave the hotel where they reside, except to "perform," and nightclub owners withhold the women's passports and control their movement; these women also experience physical and sexual abuse, withheld wages, and domestic servitude. Some women from East and West Africa also are subjected to sex trafficking in Lebanon. An increasing number of children, including Lebanese and Syrian children, are observed in the streets begging and selling trinkets; some of them may be victims of forced labor.

Men, women, and children among the estimated 1.5 million registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon are at risk of sex trafficking and forced labor. Restrictions on Syrians' ability to work legally in Lebanon, as well as strict enforcement of visas and residence permits, increase this population's vulnerability to trafficking. Child labor among the Syrian refugee population continues to increase, particularly in agriculture, construction, and street vending and begging; these children are highly vulnerable to forced labor, especially in the agricultural sector of Bekaa and Akkar and on the streets of main urban areas such as Beirut and Tripoli. NGOs report that some children are forced or coerced to conduct criminal activity. An international organization reported in 2015 evidence of bonded labor within refugee communities where child labor is used in exchange for living in informal tented settlements. Syrian gangs force Syrian refugee men, women, and children to work in the agricultural sector in the Bekaa Valley. Syrian women and girls are highly vulnerable to sex trafficking. The Lebanese government and media reported in late March 2016 an extensive sex trafficking ring exploiting primarily Syrian women and girls in Beirut; the majority of the women and girls were recruited from Syria with false promises of work and subjected to commercial sexual exploitation where they experienced mental, physical, and sexual abuse and forced abortions. Syrian girls are brought to Lebanon for sex trafficking, sometimes through the guise of early marriage. Lebanese pimps coerce some Syrian LGBTI refugees into prostitution. An international organization reported in 2016 that some Lebanese children are involved in armed tribal violence in Bekaa and Tripoli, some of whom may be forced to conduct such activity. There is also evidence of children within the Syrian refugee community in Lebanon that are associated with armed groups, who have either fought in the Syrian conflict or intend to fight in Syria as child soldiers.