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2021 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 partnering with international organizations and foreign donors to train police, prosecutors, and judges on trafficking crimes; continuing efforts to raise awareness of trafficking risks among vulnerable populations in rural communities; and conducting meetings of the newly established National Council and National Partnership Coalition. However, the government did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity. The government significantly decreased the number of trafficking investigations and prosecutions and did not convict any traffickers at the federal level during the reporting period; overall law enforcement efforts across regional-level actors also decreased. The government did not report officially identifying any trafficking victims or referring any trafficking victims to protection services during the reporting period; additionally, officials did not report disseminating or implementing standard operating procedures for victim identification or the national referral mechanism for the second consecutive year. Corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns, inhibiting law enforcement action. Officials did not report taking any actions to address internal trafficking crimes, including domestic servitude and child sex trafficking, despite the scale of the problem. Therefore Ethiopia was downgraded to Tier 2 Watch List.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Amend Proclamation 1178/2020 to bring the definition of human trafficking in line with international law. • Increase training for police, prosecutors, judges, immigration officials, and service providers to improve their ability to differentiate between human trafficking and migrant smuggling. • Vigorously investigate and prosecute traffickers who exploit victims within Ethiopia, as well as illicit labor recruiters who facilitate the transport of Ethiopians to the Middle East for exploitative labor, and sentence convicted traffickers to adequate penalties. • Disseminate, implement, and train officials to use the standard operating procedures for victim identification and the national referral mechanism to refer all victims to appropriate care. • 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 work, unaccompanied children, and foreign nationals such as Eritreans, Somalis, South Sudanese, and Cuban medical workers, and refer all victims to appropriate services. • Coordinate with international organizations to prevent trafficking crimes and potential recruitment and use of child soldiers in Tigray. • Collaborate with NGOs and international organizations to increase the government’s capacity to provide shelter and protective services to more trafficking victims, including adult males and foreign nationals. • Fully implement the overseas employment proclamation by continuing to strengthen oversight of overseas recruitment agencies, deploying labor attachés, and investigating and prosecuting illicit recruiters. • Improve screening procedures in the distribution of national identification cards and passports to prevent their fraudulent issuance to children. • Incorporate information on human trafficking and labor rights in Middle Eastern and other countries in pre-departure training provided to all migrant workers. • Increase efforts through the Attorney General’s Office to accurately report the government’s anti-trafficking statistics, including authorities’ efforts to hold accountable internal traffickers, and disaggregate data on trafficking crimes and migrant smuggling. • Coordinate with NGOs and international organizations to research the extent of human trafficking within Ethiopia and produce a publicly available annual report.

PROSECUTION

The government decreased anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. The 2015 anti-trafficking proclamation, No.909/2015, criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of 15 to 25 years’ imprisonment and a fine of 150,000 to 300,000 Ethiopian birr (\$3,830 to \$7,660) for offenses involving an adult male victim, and 25 years’ to life imprisonment and a fine of 200,000 to 500,000 Ethiopian birr (\$5,100 to \$12,760) for those involving an adult female victim or a

child victim. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. The Employment Exchange Services Proclamation No.923/2016, which governed the work of licensed labor recruitment agencies, contained various penalties for an employment agency's failure to comply with its provisions and provided that furnishing falsified evidence or documents, or advertisements used to recruit or deploy a worker, entailed criminal liability; however, it did not specify what portion of the Criminal Code applied. In April 2020, the government enacted Proclamation 1178/2020, A Proclamation to Provide for the Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and the Smuggling of Persons. However, soon thereafter, the government initiated processes to correct definitional issues within the proclamation. The government had not approved the corrections at the end of the reporting period.

In 2020, the government provided data from the federal level and three regions, compared with providing data from the federal level and six regions in 2019; additionally, the government continued to report information on human trafficking and migrant smuggling cases without a mechanism to disaggregate. At the federal level, the government reported investigating 27 potential trafficking cases in 2020, compared with zero federal investigations reported in 2019. The government reported initiating the prosecution of five federal cases under the 2015 anti-trafficking proclamation during the reporting period, compared with zero cases prosecuted at the federal level reported in 2019; all five prosecutions remained ongoing at the end of the reporting period. The government did not convict any traffickers in federal cases in 2020, compared with 121 potential traffickers convicted in 2019. In a high profile case, the government, in partnership with an international organization, reportedly arrested and prosecuted an internationally known Eritrean trafficker; however, the suspected trafficker escaped during trial and remained at-large at the end of the reporting period. At the regional level, the government reported investigating 145 potential trafficking cases, initiating prosecution of 103 potential trafficking cases, and convicting 48 potential traffickers from July to December 2020. This compared with 699 potential trafficking investigations, 30 potential trafficking cases prosecuted, and 921 potential traffickers convicted at regional levels during the previous reporting period. As reported in prior years, officials' propensity to conflate trafficking and smuggling made it probable that some reported cases involved individuals seeking to illegally cross international borders via irregular migration (migrant smuggling) and other crimes not involving exploitation through forced labor or sex trafficking. Unlike the previous reporting period, the government did not provide separate law enforcement data encompassing both transnational and internal trafficking crimes. The government did not report law enforcement efforts related to trafficking crimes involving Ethiopians exploited within the country during the reporting period, compared with 2,272 case investigations—2,119 for sex trafficking and 153 for forced labor—and convictions of 711 traffickers—558 for sex trafficking and 153 for forced labor—in the prior year. In response to the pandemic, the government imposed a state of emergency (SOE) from April to September 2020. During this time, officials reassigned all anti-trafficking police units to enforce the SOE and closed all courts, except those hearing cases related to gender-based violence. The government also redeployed anti-trafficking police units to enforce a six-month SOE that began in November 2020 in response to the ongoing conflict in Tigray.

The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking offenses; 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 of significant concern. Since the Tigray conflict began in November 2020, international organizations increasingly 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. and gender-based violence in Tigray, 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. Although not explicitly reported as human trafficking, an international organization reported receiving one allegation of sexual exploitation with trafficking indicators by one Ethiopian peacekeeper serving in the UN peacekeeping operation in Abyei during the reporting period; the government did not report investigating the allegations during the reporting period.

For the second consecutive year, the government did not report any actions taken by the Migration and Human Trafficking Crime Team, established in 2019 with 35 investigators and six prosecutors to address both human trafficking and smuggling crimes. 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 continued to partner with international organizations to conduct anti-trafficking trainings, funded by foreign donors, for regional and federal government officials. At least 173 legal professionals—80 in Dire Dawa, 75 in West Oromia, and 18 in Addis Ababa—attended trainings on the root causes of human trafficking, preventing trafficking, and prosecuting trafficking cases.

PROTECTION

The government decreased efforts to identify and protect trafficking victims and continued to disproportionately focus on transnational trafficking versus internal sex trafficking and forced labor cases. The government did not report officially identifying any trafficking victims during the reporting period. The government considered more than 14,518 individuals returning to Ethiopia during the reporting period to be vulnerable, compared with identifying 27,877 vulnerable migrants in 2019; however, it was unclear if traffickers had exploited these individuals in sex trafficking or forced labor, and the government did not formally distinguish potential trafficking victims from other vulnerable returnees, including those potentially involved in smuggling crimes. The government also did not report identifying any victims of internal trafficking crimes, compared with identifying 2,119 potential sex trafficking victims and 153 potential victims of forced labor exploited within the country in 2019. Additionally, the government did not report widely disseminating or implementing its standard operating procedures for the proactive identification of trafficking victims during the reporting year. Despite not identifying trafficking victims during the reporting period, the government reported focusing efforts on identifying victims of transnational trafficking cases during the year. 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 interviews—approximately five minutes—was insufficient to screen potential victims and the high number of returnees, which an international organization reported was more than 73,000 individuals in 2020, created challenges to expanding the time for screening. The government and international organizations reported the number of Ethiopian returnees significantly increased in 2020 due to pandemic-related economic impacts in destination countries. The government and observers also reported pandemic-related measures, such as social distancing, and limited funding led to staff reductions at screening checkpoints, which exacerbated existing victim identification challenges.

As no victims were formally identified, the government did not report referring any trafficking victims to services; however, the government, in partnership with international organizations and NGOs, continued to provide services—such as counseling, family reunification, and job training—to thousands of individuals in vulnerable populations, which may have included trafficking victims. During the previous reporting period, the government finalized a national referral mechanism (NRM) in partnership with a donor and an international organization; however, it did not report disseminating or using the NRM for the second consecutive year. Officials continued to jointly operate five migration response centers (MRCs) in Dire Dawa, Metema, Moyale, Semera, and Togochale with an international organization; the government supported the MRCs in various ways, including 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 maintained operation of child protection units in Addis Ababa and several major cities. While the units aimed to intercept and care for child trafficking victims identified en route from rural to urban areas, the government did not report actions taken by the units during the year. The government and NGOs could provide shelter, food, education, medical assistance, and familial reunification to the child trafficking victims, where feasible, but it did not report how many children received these services. One NGO reported providing basic needs, medical assistance, and education services to an unspecified number of adult and child trafficking victims during the year. There continued to be a dearth of care available for male trafficking victims. Despite reliance on civil society organizations to provide victim services, the government did not report providing financial or in-kind support to such organizations.

The government, in partnership with NGOs and international organizations, provided repatriation assistance to at least 1,588 Ethiopians in several Gulf states, compared with 7,545 repatriations in 2019; however, the government did not report if these individuals included potential trafficking victims. The government reported coordinated repatriations previously funded by Gulf states did not take place during the year; instead, Gulf states conducted mass deportations of Ethiopians due to pandemic-related stigmatization of migrants and economic impacts among employers. Officials reportedly attempted to negotiate with foreign governments to repatriate Ethiopians in smaller numbers, but the deportations continued at a rate that overwhelmed the Ethiopian response system. Some Ethiopian diplomatic missions in Gulf states provided temporary shelter for potential victims on respective mission compounds and expanded these accommodations in Lebanon from one to three centers during the reporting period. The missions engaged with host government authorities on behalf of the victims, including facilitating repatriation flights. The 2020 anti-trafficking proclamation established a fund to support victim protection and care. The victim support fund received funding through a government budget allocation; fines imposed on, and the sale of, confiscated property from traffickers; and foreign donors; however, the government did not report administering funds for victim services during the reporting period. For the second consecutive year, the government did not report whether the specialized witness protection unit—established in 2018—took any action to protect trafficking victims. Supreme Court officials previously stated children could testify against traffickers via video; however, the government did not report implementing this protection in 2020. Officials maintained a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with NGOs to improve coordination between law enforcement agencies and service providers intended to ensure service providers delivered appropriate care to victims throughout the course of legal proceedings; however, the government did not report implementing the MOU during the reporting period.

Proclamation 1178/2020 allowed foreign national victims to receive temporary residence permits or repatriation assistance on an as-needed basis. The government did not report whether any victims received deportation relief during the reporting period. The 2020 anti-trafficking proclamation provided protections to trafficking victims 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. There were no reports the government summarily deported any trafficking victims without proper screening or detained, fined, jailed, or otherwise penalized victims for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit in 2020. However, in previous years, the government housed some victims at police stations while they were waiting to provide testimony in their respective trafficking cases, and, given ad hoc implementation of formal identification and referral procedures, authorities may have detained or deported some unidentified trafficking victims.

PREVENTION

The government maintained minimal efforts to prevent trafficking. Between June and December 2020, the government reorganized its anti-trafficking structure in accordance with Proclamation 1178/2020. The proclamation established the National Council, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and responsible for the creation of policies and strategies for the prevention of migrant smuggling and human trafficking, as well as issuing directives. The proclamation also established the National Partnership Coalition, which was led by the attorney general’s office and mandated to research policies and strategies, develop directives for the national referral system, prepare program and action plans for implementation, and lead awareness raising. The National Council met once during the reporting period to formally establish its structure, while the National Partnership Coalition met twice in 2020. The government remained without an anti-trafficking national action plan (NAP) for at least the fifth consecutive year; despite Proclamation 1178/2020 requiring the National Partnership Coalition to draft a NAP, the government did not report initiating efforts to do so during the reporting period. The 2016-2020 National Human Rights Action Plan, which included some anti-trafficking activities, expired; the government never allocated funding to implement this action plan. The government, in partnership with international organizations and foreign donors, conducted various awareness campaigns on trafficking risks, primarily targeted toward children in school, rural communities, teachers, and religious leaders. The government did not operate a hotline for potential victims of trafficking and did not report tracking trafficking-related call data from hotlines operated by civil society.

Despite the government amending the employment proclamation in 2016, it did not fully implement the proclamation for the fifth consecutive reporting period. The revised overseas employment proclamation required greater oversight of private employment agencies, placement of labor attachés in Ethiopian embassies abroad to assist victims employed there, and establishment of an independent agency to identify and train migrant workers. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) trained approximately 13 labor officers during the previous reporting period to serve abroad as foreign service officers and represent Ethiopians working in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE); however, the government did not deploy labor officers in 2020 due to pandemic-related travel restrictions. The government reported an international organization provided continued training to the labor officers as deployment remained delayed. MOLSA regional labor officers continued to educate rural communities on the risks posed by illicit labor recruiters. As reported in previous years, two additional components of Proclamation 923/2016 stipulated rules for licensing and advertising for overseas employment, as well as penalties for employment agencies that contravened the revised employment proclamation (e.g., false advertisement, passport confiscation, and rights violations). The revised proclamation required employment agencies to deposit 1 million Ethiopian birr (\$25,520) in a bank as insurance, which officials would use to assist and repatriate trafficking victims. The government did not report applying these requirements to any employment agencies for the second consecutive reporting period.

During the reporting year, the government maintained bilateral labor agreements with Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE on employment treaties. These agreements reportedly required signatories 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, reasonable working hours, and leave time; however, the government did not report any instances of their implementation. 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. A foreign donor provided Ethiopian troops with anti-trafficking training prior to their deployment abroad on international peacekeeping missions. The government did not report 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. Some families and brothel owners exploit girls from Ethiopia's impoverished rural areas in domestic servitude and commercial sex within the country, while some businesspeople exploit boys in forced labor in traditional weaving, construction, agriculture, and street vending. Brothel owners exploit girls in commercial sex 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; increasingly, traffickers are replicating legitimate app-based recruitment tools to illegally recruit vulnerable populations and exploit them in forced labor. Local NGOs assess the number of internal trafficking victims, particularly children exploited in commercial sex and domestic servitude, exceeds that of external trafficking; experts report a lack of research hinders a more complete understanding of the extent of the crime as well as the government's response.

Since November 2020, ongoing internal conflict in the Tigray region has resulted in more than 63,000 Ethiopians seeking asylum in Sudan, where protection services are limited; this population is increasingly vulnerable to trafficking as displacement, food insecurity, and lack of economic opportunity continue. International organizations increasingly report armed actors, including Eritrean forces, regional forces, the ENDF, and the TPLF are reportedly responsible for committing human rights abuses and gender-based violence and gender-based violence 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 the conflict areas may be vulnerable to recruitment by non-state armed groups in areas where armed conflict is continuing. As of January 2021, an international organization reported there were more than 1.9 million IDPs in Ethiopia as a result of internal conflict and drought; individuals in resettlement camps or otherwise affected are increasingly vulnerable to trafficking due to a lack of access to justice and economic opportunity. Ethiopia hosts more than 814,000 refugees—the majority of whom are from South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, and Sudan—in 26 camps; international organizations report the Hitsats and Shimelba camps closed after being destroyed as a result of conflict in the Tigray region during the reporting period. Refugees without economic opportunity and those further displaced by camp closures are increasingly vulnerable to trafficking. Cuban medical professionals working in Ethiopia may have been forced to work by the Cuban government.

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 dire poverty, coupled with familial encouragement, compel thousands of Ethiopians, including a substantial percentage of unmarried individuals under age 30, to transit out of Ethiopia via three main routes, where they are vulnerable to trafficking. Irregular 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 taking illegal border crossings into 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, during the reporting period, observers reported 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, who often begin their journeys voluntarily, in commercial sex or forced labor in transit countries and in their intended destinations. In 2020, use of these routes reportedly decreased due to pandemic-related border closures and travel restrictions. Additionally, international organizations reported the number of Ethiopian returnees significantly increased compared with the previous year due to pandemic-related economic impacts; more than 73,000 Ethiopians returned in 2020, many of whom likely faced increased trafficking vulnerabilities in their destination country, along their route, and once back in Ethiopia. Families continue to play a major role in financing irregular migration, and they 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 and likely exploit individuals, who may consent to smuggling, in forced labor or commercial sex.

Saudi Arabia remains the primary destination for irregular 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 commercial sex. Some Ethiopians arrive in Saudi Arabia through licensed Ethiopian employment agencies but are susceptible to trafficking by employers or illegal employment agencies. The *kafala* 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. During the reporting period, 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. Some families and pimps exploit Ethiopian girls in domestic servitude and commercial sex in neighboring African countries, particularly Djibouti and Sudan. Some business owners, families, and criminals 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 women and children in forced begging, sometimes via organized begging rings, in Saudi Arabia.

ecoi.net summary:



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