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2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bangladesh

BANGLADESH: Tier 2

The Government of Bangladesh 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 on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Bangladesh remained on Tier 2. These efforts included initiating more prosecutions, particularly of labor traffickers; beginning to operate its trafficking tribunals; and collaborating with foreign governments on a transnational trafficking case. The government also opened an investigation into—and Parliament revoked the seat of—a member of Parliament involved in bribing a Kuwaiti official to fraudulently send more than 20,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers to Kuwait. The government also reported it funded 95 percent of its national action plan to fight human trafficking. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The number of convictions decreased, while law enforcement continued to deny credible reports of official complicity in trafficking, forced labor and sex trafficking of Rohingya, and child sex trafficking, including in licensed brothels, and did not demonstrate efforts to identify victims or investigate these persistent reports. While international organizations identified signs of trafficking in hundreds of migrant workers returning from Vietnam, the government, instead of screening them for trafficking indicators, arrested them on vague charges, including for damaging the country's image. The government continued to allow recruiting agencies to charge high recruitment fees to migrant workers and did not consistently address illegally operating recruitment sub-agents, leaving workers vulnerable to traffickers. Victim care remained insufficient. Officials did not consistently implement victim identification procedures or refer identified victims to care, and the government did not have shelters or adequate services for adult male victims.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Increase prosecutions and convictions for trafficking offenses, particularly of labor traffickers and complicit government officials, while respecting due process. • Take steps to eliminate recruitment fees charged to workers by licensed labor recruiters and ensure employers pay recruitment fees. • Increase investigations and prosecutions of credible allegations of trafficking of Rohingya, including cases that do not involve movement. • Disseminate and implement standard guidelines for provision of adequate victim care referral to protective services. • Expand services for trafficking victims, especially adult male victims, foreign victims, and victims exploited abroad. • Allow NGOs to provide services to trafficking victims in government shelters without a court order. • Cease requiring adult trafficking victims to obtain a family member's consent before leaving government shelters. • Continue collaboration with the Inter-Sector Coordination Group to implement measures protecting Rohingya from traffickers. • Enhance training for officials, including law enforcement, labor inspectors, immigration officers, and health care providers on identification of trafficking cases and victim referrals to services. • Fully implement and monitor for compliance the registration requirements for recruitment agents and dalals. • Improve quality of pre-departure trainings for migrant workers, including sessions on labor rights, labor laws, and access to justice and overseas assistance. • Establish clear procedures for Rohingya to file complaints in the legal system, and train law enforcement and camp management on the procedures. • Improve collaboration with NGOs and civil society for more effective partnership on anti-trafficking efforts, specifically through allowing service providers increased access to assist victims. • Finalize, adopt, and implement revisions to the 2015 MOU with India to streamline the identification and repatriation of Bangladeshi trafficking victims. • Fully implement the 2018-2022 National Plan of Action, including dedicating official resources towards enhancing victim care. • Establish standard guidelines for investigating transnational trafficking cases.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained overall law enforcement efforts. The government prosecuted more traffickers for forced labor, expanded cooperation on transnational trafficking crimes, and revoked the seat of a member of parliament following his conviction abroad for trafficking crimes, but it convicted fewer traffickers and did not take adequate steps to address internal sex trafficking or official complicity in general, both of which remained pervasive. The 2012 Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (PSHTA) criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of five years to life imprisonment and a fine of not less than 50,000 Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) (\$588). Bonded labor was treated as a separate offense with lesser prescribed penalties of five to 12 years' imprisonment and a fine of not less than 50,000 BDT (\$588). These penalties were sufficiently stringent and,

with regard to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as kidnapping. The government continued to train police officers through an anti-trafficking module at the police academy. The government also continued to train and provide in-kind support to international organization and NGO-run trainings for judicial, immigration, and border officials. The government did not report whether police and other relevant officials received training on the 2017 PSHTA implementing rules.

The government investigated 348 cases under the PSHTA (including 138 investigations continued from previous years), compared with the investigation of 403 cases (including 29 ongoing investigations) during the previous reporting period. The government prosecuted 517 suspects (184 for sex trafficking and 333 for forced labor)—an increase from the 312 individuals the government prosecuted the previous reporting period, of which 56 were for forced labor. The government convicted seven traffickers, including one for sex trafficking, two for labor trafficking, and four for undefined trafficking crimes, but acquitted 14 defendants. This was a significant decrease from courts convicting 25 traffickers the previous reporting year. Due to the pandemic, courts were closed from April to July 2020 and in-person activities were delayed until August. In addition to delaying trials, the pandemic forced postponement of the orientation and training for new anti-human trafficking tribunal judges and prosecutors who had been appointed in March 2020. The government reported more than 4,000 trafficking cases remained pending investigation or prosecution as of December 2020. The government acknowledged investigations, prosecutions, and convictions for trafficking remained inadequate compared to the scale of the problem.

In previous reporting periods, the majority of cases involved migrant smuggling of Rohingya and Bangladeshis without clear indicators of crimes of trafficking in persons; the government did not report case details of this year’s investigations or prosecutions. Some officials did not understand human trafficking and at times conflated it with migrant smuggling. Some officials continued to deny the existence of internal trafficking, especially child sex trafficking, despite observers recording multiple cases of child sex trafficking in licensed brothels each month. Police and prosecutors did not collaborate during the law enforcement process, which led to delays and the formation of weak cases for prosecution. In cross-border cases, Bangladeshi officials often did not travel abroad to collect evidence and did not have sufficient agreements to receive evidence from foreign governments. However, in one notable case, the government collaborated with United Arab Emirates (UAE) law enforcement and intelligence agencies to investigate organized crime and human trafficking following the arrest in Dhaka of a Bangladeshi alleged to have led a sex trafficking ring which forced Bangladeshi women into commercial sex in Dubai nightclubs. Police also arrested five other Bangladeshis in connection to the case. In the previous reporting period, the government established seven anti-trafficking tribunals by appointing seven judges and special prosecutors exclusively to hear human trafficking cases and address the substantial case backlog. Due to pandemic-related delays, the tribunals did not begin operating until August 2020. Legal experts praised the expediency in which one internal case before the Dhaka tribunal was decided. However, they cautioned the process for more complicated cases, especially those involving transnational elements, would require additional time before the tribunals. For cases heard outside of the tribunals, observers had previously noted the government generally did not dedicate sufficient resources to pre-trial investigations, and cases languished due to a lack of evidence or case backlogs. The government continued to allow mobile courts, established under the executive branch, to adjudicate labor violations, human trafficking cases, and migrant smuggling cases, especially in areas without a trafficking tribunal. Mobile courts could only prescribe penalties of up to three years’ imprisonment—less than the minimum penalty of five years’ imprisonment for trafficking offenses under the PSHTA. An NGO expressed concern that some village courts, five-person panels of local government officials and villagers, adjudicated trafficking cases but could only administer financial penalties, and that the courts may have subjected victims to intimidation, fraud, and corruption.

Despite continued reports of traffickers exploiting hundreds of Rohingya in forced labor and sex trafficking within Bangladesh, most Rohingya-related cases reported by law enforcement involved movement via boat—cases that might have amounted to migrant smuggling without elements of trafficking. The government did not establish clear legal reporting mechanisms within the camps, which impeded Rohingyas’ access to justice and increased impunity for offenders. Police and international humanitarian actors maintained multiple help desks in several refugee camps to provide legal assistance to female and child refugee victims of crime, but public distrust of police and security services deterred many victims of crimes, including trafficking, from approaching law enforcement for assistance. In previous reporting periods, the Bangladeshi High Court did not accept anti-trafficking cases filed by Rohingya, despite the law allowing Rohingya to file such cases in Bangladeshi courts. International organizations continued to allege some Bangladeshi officials facilitated trafficking of Rohingya, including by accepting bribes from traffickers to gain access to camps.

Official complicity in human trafficking, trafficking-related corruption, and impunity for traffickers remained serious concerns, continuing to inhibit law enforcement action during the year. The government was reluctant to acknowledge or investigate such claims. In registered brothels, some police charged bribes to ignore abuse within the establishments, to forego checking for the required documentation that each individual was older than 18, and to procure fraudulent documents for girls as young as 10 years old. Some labor attachés, local politicians, judges, and police requested bribes from victims and their families to pursue cases. Observers alleged some officials from district employment and manpower offices allegedly facilitated human trafficking, and some traffickers in rural areas had political connections that enabled them to operate with impunity. According to NGOs, some local politicians convinced victims to accept payment from recruitment sub-agents to not report fraudulent or exploitative labor recruitment actions to police. Other observers reported some police conducted slow and flawed investigations to allow traffickers to evade punishment, including when suspects were fellow officers.

Because a number of government officials, including parliamentarians, maintained close ties to foreign employment agencies, there were concerns such officials had conflicts of interest in approving migrant-friendly practices, such as prosecution of abusive recruitment agencies and increasing protections for migrant workers. During the reporting period, the Anti-Corruption Commission opened an investigation into a Bangladeshi parliamentarian accused of bribing Kuwaiti officials to bring more than 20,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers into Kuwait on work visas which stipulated a different job, and paid the workers significantly lower wages than promised, or none at all. Parliament revoked the member’s seat following his conviction and imprisonment in Kuwait for bribery. The government initiated an investigation into the accused’s wife, also a member of parliament and convicted in Kuwait on a related but lesser charge, and other family members. Media reported from 2015-2018, Malaysian employment agencies and 10 Bangladeshi recruitment agencies bribed officials and politicians in both countries to create a monopoly on recruitment of Bangladeshi workers. The monopoly increased the recruitment fees charged to workers from 37,000 BDT (\$435) to more than 400,000 BDT (\$4,710) per person—higher than the government’s legal maximum—which increased Bangladeshi migrant workers’ vulnerability to debt-based coercion. After two warnings from the Dhaka High Court, the government submitted its investigative report in November 2019, and for a second year no hearings were held. Other than the investigation into the member of parliament, and despite ongoing allegations of official complicity, the government did not report any other investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking offenses.

PROTECTION

The government increased the number of victims identified but maintained severely inadequate victim protection, especially for Bangladeshi trafficking victims identified overseas. The government identified 6,866 potential trafficking victims, a significant increase from 585 in the previous reporting period; however, the government did not report details of this number or account for the large increase and, in the past, had reported many smuggled migrants in the overall number. Traffickers exploited the majority of victims identified through forced labor. Organizations identified and provided support to at least 1,683 trafficking victims, including 339 Rohingya identified between December 2019-2020. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the government’s lead agency for combating trafficking, had standard operating procedures (SOPs) for proactive trafficking victim identification; however, the government did not report how widely officials disseminated or used the SOPs. Some police officers used a checklist to proactively identify victims when they came into contact with individuals in commercial sex establishments; however, the government did not formally adopt or disseminate the checklist, and its use was inconsistent. The government, in partnership with an international organization, developed a rapid victim identification mobile application during the reporting period, and the government reported initiating a virtual method for trafficking victims to file police reports.

During the reporting period, the government adopted a standard policy to refer victims to services, although it retained a court-order mechanism to do so, and some officials followed an NGO’s written guidelines for referral to and provision of care. Authorities could refer trafficking victims to government or NGO shelters; however, the government did not provide reimbursement or overall funding to the NGOs. The government referred 126 victims to government shelters and 167 to NGO-run shelters, an increase from approximately 74 victims referred in the previous reporting period. While the government did not provide trafficking-specific services, police operated multiple centers for women and child victims of violence, including trafficking, in each of Bangladesh’s eight divisions, offering short-term shelter, medical services, and psychological care. In response to pandemic-related restrictions, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs created psycho-social support options through cell phone and email. With partial funding from a foreign government, the Ministry of Social Welfare (MSW) operated some longer-term shelters for women and child victims of violence, including trafficking victims, which could provide similar care. MSW shelters, however, required a court order referral, and victims could not leave without a family member’s consent. The government also required NGOs and international organizations to obtain a court order to contact victims in government shelters to provide additional services. Some victims reported abuse within the shelters. Authorities forced some victims who could not obtain family consent to remain in the shelters for as long as 10 years; some victims referred to these homes as “jails.” The government did not report how many trafficking victims its police and MSW shelters assisted during the reporting period. Government-run hospitals also had one-stop centers to assist female victims of crime, although it was unclear whether and how officials referred women to these centers. The government generally did not view adult men as trafficking victims. While some NGO shelters could house male victims, the majority of NGO shelters – similar to government shelters – could not, although most NGOs could provide non-shelter services to adult male victims.

The government did not allow foreign victims to access government services. NGOs could care for foreign trafficking victims. NGOs could provide two or three days of temporary care to Rohingya trafficking victims in safe homes but then most returned to the refugee camps, where they remained vulnerable to re-trafficking. The government’s NGO Affairs Bureau at times withheld approval for foreign funding to some NGOs working on some human rights or humanitarian issues, which may have affected provision of services to vulnerable populations, including trafficking victims. The pandemic limited resources and strained the ability of NGOs to offer victim services. The PSHTA entitled victims to protection during judicial proceedings, including police security, and allowed victims to provide testimony via video conference. While some victims participated in the investigation and prosecution of their traffickers, the government and NGOs noted insufficient implementation of the protection provision caused the vast majority of trafficking victims not to participate. While the 2012 PSHTA mandated creation of a fund to assist victims in seeking compensation from their traffickers, the government had not yet created the fund. All trafficking victims could file civil suits seeking compensation. The government reportedly screened for trafficking among individuals before arresting them; however, because law enforcement did not

uniformly employ SOPs to identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, including women in commercial sex, law enforcement may have penalized sex trafficking victims for unlawful acts their traffickers compelled them to commit. For example, NGOs in the previous reporting period reported law enforcement raided brothels and arrested foreign women working in commercial sex for violating their visas without efforts to screen for trafficking. NGOs reported some authorities detained and fined trafficking victims in transit for failure to carry a passport and may have deported some victims without screening for trafficking. The government did not provide legal alternatives to removal of foreign trafficking victims to countries where they might face hardship or retribution.

The government made minimal efforts to assist Bangladeshi sex and labor trafficking victims abroad. MHA and the Government of India continued to revise but did not finalize SOPs to implement a 2015 memorandum of understanding (MOU) on trafficking victim identification and repatriation. The governments facilitated, and NGOs funded, repatriation of trafficking victims from India, but without a final, adopted SOP, the lengthy and complex approval system resulted in some Bangladeshi victims languishing in Indian shelters for up to six years. The Ministry of Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE) maintained 29 labor offices in embassies and consulates overseas to provide welfare services to Bangladeshi migrant workers. International organizations continued to report their labor wings had neither the staffing nor the resources to assist the large number of migrant workers, especially at embassies with large numbers of Bangladeshi workers in the Gulf. MEWOE operated four safe houses abroad for female workers with strong indicators of trafficking who fled abusive employers but did not report how many individuals the shelters assisted. While the government could fund some trafficking victim repatriation, it often took so long that victims funded it themselves and incurred additional debt. MEWOE operated a desk at the airport providing up to 5,000 BDT (\$59) and information on available NGO services to returning female migrant workers, including trafficking victims.

While MEWOE confirmed approximately 21,230 Bangladeshi workers returned from Saudi Arabia during the reporting period, many likely domestic workers, the government did not report screening any of the returning workers for signs of trafficking. Additionally, at least 396 Bangladeshi migrant workers from other countries returned with substantial indicators of trafficking during the reporting period, some of whom the government penalized on ambiguous charges of “damaging the image of the nation” without appropriately screening for trafficking. In September 2020, the government arrested and charged 81 migrant workers recently returned from Vietnam under section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which allowed the government to detain, without a warrant, individuals suspected of committing or intending to commit cognizable offenses. Court documents included allegations the migrants damaged the country’s image by protesting their payment of recruitment fees for jobs that never materialized in front of the Bangladesh embassy in Vietnam. While MEWOE closed six recruiting agencies associated with the Vietnam case, the government maintained the charges against the 81 migrant workers. Additionally, 219 Bangladeshi workers who had returned from Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain were arrested on July 5, 2020 for allegedly committing similar ambiguous offenses abroad. NGOs called for the migrant workers’ release and treatment as trafficking victims. In November 2020, authorities released the migrant workers on bail. In the previous reporting period, the government occasionally required victims of labor exploitation, including labor trafficking, to remain at embassies overseas to pursue a civil case against their employers; many victims wanted to return home and thus could not pursue cases. The government did not file any trafficking cases in destination countries but did assist with investigations in Libya, Kuwait, and the UAE. Some officials blamed victims for their own labor trafficking, claiming workers were “unprepared.” The government relied on NGOs to support victims upon repatriation. Overseas Bangladeshi workers who secured their employment through MEWOE could lodge complaints with MEWOE to seek restitution for labor and recruitment violations, including allegations of forced labor, through an arbitration process. However, trafficking-related corruption impeded the process, which often yielded minimal awards. At least one NGO reported the Bureau of Manpower and Employment Training (BMET), which facilitated the arbitration, prohibited NGO advocates from accompanying migrant workers, forcing workers to arbitrate claims alone against both powerful recruitment agencies and BMET. MEWOE reported it settled 424 complaints against 142 recruitment agents in 2020 which compelled them to pay 24.04 million BDT (\$282,820) total to migrant workers, compared with 214 recruitment agents compelled to pay 34.4 million BDT (\$404,710) in compensation to 352 workers in 2019; MEWOE did not report whether any complaints involved forced labor. Because the government did not consistently initiate criminal investigations into migrant workers exploited abroad, and civil remedies remained inadequate, civil society organizations ran alternate dispute resolution systems to assist labor trafficking victims in obtaining some financial remedies.

PREVENTION

The government maintained efforts to prevent trafficking. The government continued implementing its 2018-2022 anti-trafficking national action plan (NAP). The government harmonized the NAP implementation with funded Sustainable Development Goals to cover costs associated with 95 percent of the plan. MHA continued to lead the inter-ministerial anti-trafficking committee, which met bi-monthly. During the reporting year, many MHA officials with responsibilities for coordinating anti-trafficking efforts transitioned to new government positions, leading to some loss of institutional knowledge and momentum in implementing the NAP. The government created the National Authority, an institution to serve as a government-wide supervisory body on combating trafficking, but civil society reported the National Authority was neither active, nor funded. The government also did not clarify the distinct roles of the National Authority versus the inter-ministerial committee. MHA did not make its annual reports on human trafficking public, and anti-trafficking law enforcement data was published online but did not always contain current statistics.

The 2013 Overseas Employment and Migrants Act (OEMA) criminalized fraudulent recruitment and unlawful recruitment fees; however, these provisions still permitted the government to set legal recruitment fees at rates between 85,000 BDT and 262,000 BDT (\$1,000-\$3,080), high enough to render many migrant workers indebted and vulnerable to trafficking through debt-based coercion. A research organization reported that in 2018, Bangladeshi migrant workers traveling to Saudi Arabia on average paid more than 450 percent of the government’s fixed recruitment price for the total labor migration process. According to the research, the government’s fixed recruitment fee for Saudi Arabia was equivalent to a Bangladeshi worker’s salary for five-and-a-half-months, and workers in reality paid fees equivalent to more than two years of salary. The Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) oversaw 1,186 licensed labor recruitment agencies. The government’s vigilance task force continued operations against corrupt recruitment agencies, travel agencies, and dalals—sub-agents who operated in rural locations and connected prospective migrant workers to licensed employment agencies. MEWOE suspended 32 recruitment agencies for operating in violation of the law, including breach of employment contracts and recruitment regulations. Following the death of 26 Bangladeshi migrants in Libya, the government called for an investigation and punishment of perpetrators. The police arrested 19 people, including two labor recruiters. The government also approached INTERPOL for the first time to place six individuals on their red notice watchlist, which led to the arrest of two individuals at the close of the reporting period. NGOs and academics welcomed the quick arrests but questioned the government’s commitment to addressing vulnerabilities that led to trafficking in general. Authorities referred some of the recruitment agents to mobile courts, which convicted and sentenced two individuals to different terms of imprisonment and imposed fines of 1.46 million BDT (\$17,180) for labor trafficking-related offenses under the 2013 OEMA, including sending migrant workers abroad unlawfully, charging unlawful recruitment fees, and fraudulent recruitment. Mobile courts prescribed fines or imprisonment; fines were inadequate penalties to deter the crime. In 2018, mobile courts convicted 11 individuals, although it was unclear in both years how many cases contained elements of trafficking in persons.

In February 2020, the government granted MEWOE authority to register recruiting sub-agents (dalals) and required brokers to register sub-agents and representatives. MEWOE did not report how it was monitoring existing or new agents for compliance. NGOs stated the government needed to do more to bring all recruiting companies into compliance with this directive. MEWOE reported it was developing a scoring process to rank licensed recruiting agencies. BAIRA acknowledged migrant workers frequently paid dalals fees in addition to the legal amount BAIRA agents charged before the workers began the formal recruitment process. Dalals also directly connected workers to overseas jobs by providing fake visas and other documentation, and in some cases, incorrect information about the migration process and the job in the destination country. Observers stated a migrant worker’s financial situation often determined job placement, not skills or abilities, and migrant workers frequently paid as much as five times the government’s maximum fee level. The government maintained a number of bilateral labor agreements, in part intended to protect Bangladeshi workers abroad, although there was no evidence the government enforced the MOUs. As some countries closed their borders due to the pandemic, the government expanded labor markets beyond traditional locations and, for the first time, signed labor agreements with Uzbekistan and Albania in November 2020. Some NGOs expressed concerns with the labor conditions in these countries. At the beginning of the pandemic, the government took steps to prepare for the anticipated repatriation of Bangladeshi workers, including by providing a one-time payment for returning migrant workers, and encouraging destination countries to protect migrant worker jobs and provide financial support for workers who had been laid off. For some Bangladeshis still migrating during the pandemic, the government continued to require pre-departure training, including safe migration and anti-trafficking components, and a 30-day pre-departure training course for female domestic workers. The government offered safe migration information through numerous district employment and manpower offices and training centers. However, it was unclear how many migrants were aware of these services and accessed them before traveling abroad. BMET, the government agency responsible for preparing and certifying outbound Bangladeshi workers, allowed some recruitment agencies to prohibit briefings on topics “against recruiting agencies’ interests.”

Labor inspectors had responsibility for monitoring workplaces and reporting allegations of forced and child labor to police for criminal investigation. While international organizations estimated 93 percent of child labor—including forced child labor—took place in the informal sector, inspectors were not empowered to monitor the informal sector. NGOs estimated child labor increased by 30 to 40 percent in 2020, due to the pandemic. Staffing and resources to inspect for labor violations, including forced and child labor, remained severely inadequate, and inspectors regularly conducted announced inspections, which gave employers time to hide children or exploitative conditions. Between July and December 2020, inspectors filed 20 cases against employers for the worst forms of child labor; they did not report whether they also referred these cases to police for criminal investigation. The government continued to conduct national awareness campaigns through print media, television, and text messages, and through its local counter-trafficking committees, at times in partnership with NGOs. The government maintained several helplines to report crime; during the reporting period, the helplines received 187 reports of trafficking.

The government continued to allow international organizations and NGOs to provide some assistance to refugees. In January 2020 the government endorsed an international organization’s pilot program to introduce the Burmese national curriculum to some Rohingya ages 11 to 13 years old in refugee camps, allowing them access to some schooling. Due to pandemic-related lockdowns, schools remained closed during the reporting period and the pilot program could not be expanded. However, the government continued to bar Rohingya from formal schools and working legally and restricted their movement; in addition, it continued to suspend birth registration for Rohingya, all of which increased vulnerability to trafficking. The government provided anti-trafficking training to its troops prior to their deployment as peacekeepers and provided anti-trafficking training for its diplomatic personnel. During the previous reporting period, the government began criminally investigating one repatriated peacekeeper for alleged

child sexual exploitation in Haiti in 2017, which the UN had substantiated in the previous reporting period; the investigation remained ongoing. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for child sex tourism.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Bangladesh, and traffickers exploit victims from Bangladesh abroad. Traffickers exploit some Bangladeshi men, women, and children who migrate willingly to work in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, especially Brunei, Malaysia, and the Maldives, in forced labor. Traffickers also exploit Bangladeshis in forced labor in South Asia, Southern and Eastern Africa, Europe, and the United States. Many Bangladeshis migrate for work each year through illegal channels and traffickers target them. Before departure, many workers assume debt to pay high recruitment fees, imposed legally by recruitment agencies belonging to BAIRA and illegally by unlicensed sub-agents; this places workers at risk of debt-based coercion. Some recruitment agencies, agents, and employers also commit recruitment fraud, including contract switching; this includes promising women and children jobs and exploiting them in sex trafficking upon arrival. In recent years, authorities identified more than 100 Bangladeshi male forced labor victims in construction in Vanuatu, and officials received thousands of complaints of non-payment of wages and contract switching among the 30,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers in Brunei. More than 69,000 of the 234,000 Bangladeshi workers in Maldives are undocumented, and some report passport retention, underpayment or non-payment of wages, and fraudulent recruitment. In Saudi Arabia, traffickers exploit through labor trafficking a substantial number of the hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi female domestic workers. Officials report that approximately 200 domestic workers return to Bangladesh from Saudi Arabia each month with indicators of forced labor.

Traffickers exploit Bangladeshi women and girls in forced labor and sex trafficking abroad, including in India, Pakistan, and Gulf countries. Traffickers sold some women who migrated through Bangladeshi recruitment agencies to Lebanon or Jordan for domestic work into forced labor. Some Chinese traffickers force Bangladeshi women, specifically indigenous women from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, into sex trafficking and domestic servitude through arranged marriages. Some traffickers falsify identity documents to make children appear older than age 18 to send them abroad. Since 2016, 473 bodies of deceased Bangladeshi domestic workers have been repatriated from the Middle East, including 63 between January and September 2020. This includes the body of a 13-year-old girl sent to Saudi Arabia through a labor recruiter with a falsified passport listing her age as 27. During 2020, NGOs reported traffickers used promises of employment in “COVID-19 free” locations to attract victims.

Traffickers continue to exploit adults and children from all regions of the country in Bangladesh’s legal brothels, many illegal brothels, and private hotels. Traffickers use false promises of work to lure poor women and children into sex trafficking and fabricate exorbitant debts the women and girls as young as 10 must repay. Child sex trafficking remained widespread; experts estimate 20,000 children are both growing up in and are exploited in commercial sex in Bangladeshi brothels. Several women and girls reported traffickers preyed on them and sold them to brothels, after the women fled abusive child marriages. Other women reported they had grown up in brothels because their mothers were engaged in commercial sex, and brothel owners forced them into sex work when they were children. In some registered brothels, owners force children to take steroids to appear older. In legal brothels, some police charge bribes to ignore abuse within the establishment, forego checking for required documentation that each individual is older than 18, and to procure fraudulent documentation for children as young as 10 years old. Some traffickers force sex trafficking victims to become addicted to drugs and use addiction to keep them in sex trafficking and force criminality. Sex traffickers exploit street children in exchange for food, shelter, protection, and money. NGOs describe increasingly widespread job losses, wage cuts, and poverty in rural areas and urban slums due to the pandemic, which forces some children into begging and commercial sex.

Traffickers often used debt-based coercion to compel workers into labor, exploiting an initial debt assumed by a worker as part of the employment terms. Traffickers force adults and children to work in the shrimp and fish processing industries, aluminum, tea, and garment factories, brick kilns, dry fish production, and shipbreaking. Traffickers force children younger than 14 into domestic work, including through torture and restricting their movement. In 2018, a survey by an international organization found more than 400,000 children in domestic work in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi children are at risk for forced labor in tanneries. Traffickers coerce street children into criminality or force them to beg, and begging ringmasters sometimes maim children to increase earnings. Traffickers force children, especially in border areas, to produce and transport drugs, particularly *yaba*. Traffickers use coercive debts to force Bangladeshi families and Indian migrant workers to labor in brick kilns, shrimp farming, and on tea estates. NGOs allege some officials allow human traffickers to operate at India-Bangladesh border crossings and maritime embarkation points.

Bangladesh hosts more than one million undocumented Rohingya in refugee camps and host communities in Cox’s Bazar near the Burmese border and other parts of the country, approximately 700,000 of whom arrived after August 2017. Traffickers exploit Rohingya men, women, and children from refugee camps in sex and labor trafficking both within Bangladesh and transnationally. Traffickers transport Rohingya girls within Bangladesh to Chittagong and Dhaka and transnationally to India, Malaysia, and Nepal for sex trafficking, sometimes using false promises of jobs or marriage; some traffickers “trade” these girls over the internet. As reported in previous reporting periods, local criminal networks take Rohingya women from refugee camps at night, exploit them in sex trafficking, and bring them back to the camps during the day. International organizations allege some Bangladeshi officials facilitate trafficking of Rohingya, including accepting bribes from traffickers to gain access to camps. Rohingya girls and boys are recruited from camps and forced to labor as shop hands, fishers, rickshaw pullers, and domestic workers.

Some Bangladeshi fishers use debt-based coercion to exploit Rohingya men if they place their shelter on the fisher's land. Some Rohingya men who fled to Bangladesh from Burma decades ago have been trapped in forced labor through debt-based coercion to Bangladeshi fishers for decades. In 2016, some traffickers sold into forced labor Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants, who traveled by boat to Southeast Asian and could not pay ransoms. Multiple NGOs and humanitarian officials assess Rohingyas' statelessness and inability to receive formal schooling or to work legally has increased their vulnerability to traffickers. International organizations allege some Bangladeshi officials facilitate trafficking of Rohingya, including by accepting bribes from traffickers to gain access to camps. Tourists increase demand for child sex tourism, including exploitation of Rohingya girls, near Cox's Bazar.

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