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2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Lebanon

Executive Summary Title

The Government of Lebanon does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Lebanon remained on Tier 2. These efforts included implementing changes to reporting processes to prevent automatic penalization of migrant workers leaving abusive employers and adopting a screening tool (developed with an international organization) to better identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, including migrant workers. The government also continued to temporarily waive requirements for employer approval to allow migrant workers to change employers and waived most overstay fines incurred by migrant workers during the pandemic. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. Lebanon had a caretaker government for 13 months, including five months of the reporting period until September 2021, which limited the government’s ability to establish effective anti-trafficking policies for part of the reporting period. For the second consecutive year, the government did not report initiating any new prosecutions and did not convict any traffickers. The government did not approve the labor law amendment extending legal protections to all foreign workers that has been pending since 2009 or approve the draft standardized contract for migrant workers for the second consecutive year. Despite adopting a new screening tool, the government did not implement formal victim identification and referral procedures, which resulted in the potential for unidentified victims to face arrest, detention, or deportation for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit. Lebanon’s visa sponsorship system continued to create vulnerabilities for the exploitation of migrant workers and remained a significant impediment to authorities identifying and protecting trafficking victims.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Finalize and implement government-approved procedures for officials to identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, such as undocumented or detained migrants, women holding Artist visas, domestic workers, and Syrian refugees, for referral to protection services.
- Increase efforts to ensure trafficking victims are not arrested, detained, or deported for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit, such as immigration or “prostitution” violations.
- Enact the labor law amendment extending legal protections to all foreign workers, including domestic workers and Artist visa holders, and approve the draft standardized contract for migrant workers as initially submitted to the State Shura Council in 2020.
- Strengthen and expand efforts to reform the visa sponsorship system to ensure all foreign workers, including domestic workers and Artist visa holders, are not bound to abusive employers, and allow workers full freedom of movement, including by permanently waiving previous employer approval requirements for workers to change employers.
- Increase investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of perpetrators of all forms of trafficking under the anti- trafficking law and investigate for potential trafficking crimes employers and recruitment agents who withhold workers’ passports, travel documents, or wages.
- Ensure provisions are available to victims for legal alternatives to their removal to countries in which they would face retribution and hardship.
- Increase efforts to train judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officials, and diplomatic personnel on trafficking and application of the anti-trafficking law.
- Screen all domestic workers in detention centers for trafficking indicators and refer victims to care.
- Take concrete steps to improve oversight of Artist visas, a program that contributes to the vulnerability of women to sex trafficking.
- Ensure the judiciary coordinates with the Directorate of General Security (DGS) to consistently apply the anti-trafficking law by granting temporary residency permits for trafficking victims and allowing victims to work.

- Continue to work in partnership with NGOs to screen for, identify, and provide protection services, including witness support during criminal proceedings, for all victims.
- Increase efforts to raise public awareness of trafficking, including exploitation of migrant domestic workers.
- Formally establish the victim assistance fund.
- Adopt and implement the national anti-trafficking action plan (NAP).
- Improve the judiciary’s capacity to collect, compile, and track data and outcomes of trafficking cases from all courts.

PROSECUTION

The government decreased overall law enforcement efforts. The 2011 anti-trafficking law criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of five to seven years’ imprisonment and fines if the offense involved an adult victim and 10 to 12 years’ imprisonment and fines for those involving 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 pandemic, compounded by ongoing financial, economic, and political crises, continued to affect law enforcement’s ability to investigate trafficking cases and compile data. Due to the ongoing economic and financial crisis, the Ministry of Interior (MOI), Ministry of Justice (MOJ), and other law enforcement agencies reduced their workforce to only come to work one or two days per week, limiting the government’s ability to respond to information requests. In addition, the MOJ did not have a centralized data collection system, impeding the government’s ability to report data on prosecutions and convictions. As a pandemic mitigation measure, law enforcement worked on a rotational basis, reducing the normal number of officers on duty, and most offices did not have basic supplies including electricity or fuel for vehicles or generators. Despite the relaxation of some pandemic mitigation measures, courts only partially re-opened with reduced hours of operation. In addition, strikes closed the courts from May to September 2021, and an ongoing public sector labor curtailment resulted in most government offices only being open once a week. In 2021, the Internal Security Forces (ISF) investigated 21 potential sex trafficking cases. Additionally, DGS investigated 102 cases of suspected trafficking involving migrant domestic workers and adult nightclub workers holding *Artiste* visas. DGS reported it determined 35 of the 102 cases met the criteria for trafficking cases; 32 cases involved labor exploitation, and three cases involved sexual exploitation. The 123 total investigations in 2021 represented a significant decrease from 218 initiated in 2020. For the second consecutive year, the government did not report any new prosecutions or convictions. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government officials complicit in human trafficking crimes. In a notable February 2022 case, prosecutors, for the first time, brought criminal charges of slavery and forced labor against the former employer and recruitment agency of a migrant domestic worker; the case was ongoing at the end of the reporting period. Separately, the MOI investigated a Lebanese national employed by the Kenyan consulate for allegedly further exploiting potential trafficking victims in forced labor who had come to the consulate for assistance; the government did not report the status of the case at the end of the reporting period.

Due to courts’ reduced capacity, all but emergency trials were suspended, and the government prioritized completing investigations that would allow the release of pre-trial detainees to reduce overcrowding in prisons. The ISF anti-trafficking unit remained understaffed and underfunded, with only 22 officers covering all of Lebanon, and no field offices outside of Beirut; this continued to limit the ISF’s work. Additionally, government officials and NGOs continued to report some judges lacked understanding of the anti-trafficking law and knowledge of best practices for handling trafficking cases. Officials generally sought to resolve trafficking cases involving foreign workers through mediation between the employer and worker, rather than referring them for criminal prosecution. Government officials continued to report security forces were reluctant to arrest parents for subjecting their children to trafficking, usually in forced begging, due to a lack of social services available should the child be removed from the family. The ISF, DGS, and MOJ occasionally included specialized anti-trafficking training as a part of their curriculum for personnel. The government also continued to encourage officials to participate in anti-trafficking trainings provided by NGOs but did not report providing financial or in-kind support to those trainings.

PROTECTION

The government maintained inadequate victim identification and protection efforts, and the government remained dependent on NGOs to provide most victim services. The government did not formally adopt procedures drafted in 2014 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 reporting period, the government coordinated with an international organization to draft new standard operating procedures (SOPs) for victim identification, but the government did not finalize nor implement the SOPs by the end of the reporting period. The Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) continued to work with an international organization to develop a digital tool to better identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, including migrant workers; at the end of the reporting period, MOSA adopted the tool, but it had not yet been digitized and fully operationalized. The government identified at least 70 sex and labor trafficking victims through the course of investigations and referred all of them to NGO protection services in 2021. The number of victims identified and referred to services in 2021 represented a decrease from the 156 victims the government identified in 2020 but an increase from 63 identified victims in 2019. During the reporting period, an NGO reported identifying at least 163 trafficking victims. The government did not report whether a DGS-operated hotline remained operational during the reporting period. The Ministry of Labor’s (MOL)

complaints office and 24-hour hotline received 250 trafficking-related complaints; the government reported resolving the majority of these complaints but did not report further details. An NGO identified 26 victims through calls to the hotline it operated.

The government did not directly provide protection services to trafficking victims, nor funding for services for adult victims, but it continued to work in partnership with NGOs to provide essential victim services. NGO-run victim care facilities in Lebanon were dedicated only to female and child trafficking victims; there were no services available or government resources dedicated to male trafficking victims, even though forced labor of men in construction reportedly continued. As in previous reporting periods, an NGO reported referring male victims to their embassy or consulate for accommodation. The government and an NGO renewed a longstanding memorandum of understanding whereby DGS referred female victims to an NGO-run safe house and provided security for the location; the government did not allow victims to work while receiving assistance at the safe house. In response to pandemic-related mitigation measures, the NGO continued to provide single-occupant rooms for quarantine purposes. During the reporting period, the safe house assisted 183 trafficking victims. Victim services were not time-limited or conditional upon victims' cooperation with law enforcement. MOSA also continued to coordinate and fund the provision of protection services to child trafficking victims through contractual agreements with NGOs. Foreign embassies that provided shelter to nationals when NGO shelters were full reported providing accommodation to an increased number of their nationals, including domestic servitude victims, due to the economic crisis. For the third consecutive year, MOSA coordinated with an international organization to provide technical support for the development of an implementation decree to create a victim assistance fund; the decree remained in draft form at the end of the reporting period.

The government continued to arrest, detain, and deport unidentified victims for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit, such as domestic workers who fled abusive employers, out-of-status or undocumented migrant workers, women holding *Artiste* visas, and persons in commercial sex. NGOs reported some foreign victims, including migrant domestic workers, sometimes refused to file complaints or retracted testimony due to fear of reprisal or deportation. Under the visa sponsorship system, foreign workers—including foreign trafficking victims who left their place of employment without permission from their employer—forfeited their legal status, thereby increasing the risk of arrest, detention, and deportation. DGS continued using new administrative procedures adopted in February 2021 for employers to inform DGS about domestic workers who have left the workplace; the new procedures replaced previously used employer complaint systems that automatically launched prosecutions of migrant workers who left their workplace. In addition, the new procedures prohibited the use of certain language in official reports, such as language implying domestic workers violated employment conditions like “fled” or “ran away,” replacing them with the phrasing “left the workplace.” Authorities could subject foreign workers without valid residence and work permits to detention for one to two months—or longer in some instances—followed by deportation; due to the pandemic, authorities did not exercise this authority during the reporting period. Furthermore, authorities could immediately deport women holding *Artiste* visas upon arrest for “prostitution” violations; however, DGS reported it did not deport any *Artiste* visa holders during the reporting period and no *Artiste* visas were issued in 2021 due to the ongoing pandemic, economic, and financial crises.

DGS continued to operate a 750-person detention center where authorities detained foreign domestic workers for violating the terms of their work contracts or visas. As in past years, DGS allowed an NGO to operate a permanent office inside the detention center with unhindered access to detainees to provide medical and psycho-social services. However, due to a decrease in government funding to the NGO over the past three reporting periods, the NGO was unable to continue providing health services to detainees—including trafficking victims—and was only able to provide social and legal services. DGS also continued to permit the NGO to interview detainees to identify trafficking victims among the detention center population, although interviews were limited due to pandemic-related mitigation measures; NGOs identified 130 trafficking victims in the detention center during the reporting period, compared with 16 victims the NGO identified in 2020. In response to the pandemic, DGS announced only detainees with pending judicial action would be held at the detention center and other detainees would be released with the option of temporary residency or repatriation assistance. DGS reported that as of September 2020, DGS had released and repatriated 600 of the 700 detainees who had been at the center at the start of the reporting period. The NGO continued to report high levels of professionalism, sensitivity, and awareness among DGS officials and investigators, which allowed the NGO to more effectively identify victims among detainees.

Victims could file civil suits to obtain compensation; however, the government did not report whether courts awarded compensation to victims through civil suits during the reporting period. Investigative judges could exclude the identity of a victim from official reports if there was a concern that providing information about the crime could result in a threat to the life or safety of the victim or their family. In addition, victims could provide testimony via video or written statement. The government did not report whether any of these safeguards were invoked or provided during the reporting period. Judges could allow foreign victims to reside in Lebanon during the investigation, but the government did not report any judges issued such a decision. NGOs continued to report foreign victims preferred quick administrative settlements followed by repatriation rather than long criminal prosecutions because of the lack of protection services or resettlement options during criminal proceedings. An international organization reported pandemic-related lockdowns and airport closures further encouraged victims to return home rather than remain in Lebanon under severe lockdown measures and poor economic conditions. Therefore, authorities faced challenges pursuing potential cases of trafficking when victims chose voluntary repatriation, as they were not present in the country to testify against their traffickers. 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. During the reporting period, an NGO reported Lebanese authorities deported or otherwise created coercive environments that pushed Syrian refugees to return to Syria without assessing protection

needs; the Government of Syria had a government policy or pattern of human trafficking, exploiting its nationals in forced labor in compulsory military service by forcing them to serve for indefinite or otherwise arbitrary periods and recruiting or using child soldiers.

PREVENTION

The government maintained weak efforts to prevent trafficking. The national anti-trafficking commission under the National Human Rights Committee continued to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts during the reporting period. The government did not adopt its 2013 draft NAP, but relevant ministries continued to implement portions of the plan. During the reporting period, MOSA worked with an international organization to develop a plan to protect vulnerable migrants; the plan was pending finalization at the end of the reporting period. The government did not report conducting any public awareness campaigns during the reporting period. DGS and the MOL continued to operate hotlines to receive reports of abuse and migrant worker complaints, including suspected trafficking crimes. The MOL hotline received 250 trafficking-related calls, but the government did not report how many calls the DGS hotline received during the reporting period. The government did not report whether the government identified any victims or initiated any investigations as a result of these calls. DGS continued a program to inform *Artiste* visa holders about restrictions and obligations of their visa status upon arrival to Beirut Rafik Hariri International Airport. Under the program, if the visa holder objected to the visa's terms, they were free to return to their home country. DGS reported that no *Artiste* visas were issued during the reporting period. Under a directive from DGS, airport officers continued to return passports directly to foreign domestic workers upon their arrival in Lebanon, but NGOs reported that many employers ultimately confiscated workers' passports in private. The government did not have a law that prohibited or penalized confiscation of workers' passports or travel documents by employers or labor agents.

Lebanon's labor law excluded migrant domestic workers, denying them protections such as a minimum wage, limits on working hours, and other labor protections. In September 2020, the caretaker Minister of Labor attempted to introduce an amendment to the draft labor law extending legal protections to foreign workers, including domestic workers; however, the State Shura Council determined a minister in caretaker status could not submit an amendment to a law, and the draft labor law remained pending at the end of the reporting period. The standardized work contract for migrant domestic workers drafted by a joint government and international organization working group to reform the visa sponsorship system and approved by the caretaker Minister of Labor during the previous reporting period remained suspended at the end of the reporting period. An NGO reported the MOL circulated, in February 2022, a new draft standardized contract that failed to meet basic international labor standards; the MOL denied issuing such a draft. Because many domestic workers became unemployed due to the economic crisis in Lebanon, DGS for the second consecutive year waived requirements for notarized employer approval for workers to change employers; the government did not report for how long these requirements would be waived. DGS also continued a program begun in March 2020 to waive most overstay fines and provided plane tickets for an unspecified number of migrant workers, including potential trafficking victims; although the program still required out-of-status migrants to pay one year's worth of fees—between 300,000 and 400,000 lira (\$200-\$270)—DGS waived all fees when NGOs or foreign embassies requested. A 2015 ministerial decree prohibited recruitment agencies from requesting or receiving any worker-paid recruitment fees, but the government acknowledged numerous unregistered recruitment agencies operated illegally and may have charged migrant workers recruitment fees. In 2021, the MOL closed three recruitment agencies for labor violations or complaints of mistreating migrant domestic workers. The MOL also maintained a list of an unknown number of recruitment agencies that had committed fraudulent recruitment practices; however, owners of blacklisted recruitment agencies reportedly opened new agencies registered under the names of new partners. The government, however, did not report prosecuting any recruitment or employment agencies for potential trafficking crimes during the reporting period. 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, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Lebanon, and traffickers exploit victims from Lebanon abroad. Women and girls from South and Southeast Asia and an increasing number from East and West Africa are subjected to domestic servitude in Lebanon. According to an international organization, 250,000 migrant domestic workers were in Lebanon in 2019. Lebanese government officials and NGOs report most employers withhold their domestic workers' passports and some employers also withhold workers' wages, force them to work excessive hours without rest days, restrict their freedom of movement, and physically or sexually abuse them. NGOs report that such abuse of domestic workers is typically underreported. Many migrant workers arrive in Lebanon through legal employment agencies but are subsequently exploited or abused by their employers, and some employment agencies recruit workers through fraudulent or false job offers. The prolonged economic crisis exacerbated by the pandemic prompted approximately 30,000 migrant workers to leave Lebanon in 2020. The government issued 23,036 visas for migrant workers in 2021, compared to 9,409 in 2020, and 33,075 in 2019. NGOs reported employers continued dropping domestic workers off at their embassies during the reporting period because they were unable to continue paying salaries, and an international organization reported renewals of migrant domestic worker contracts decreased from 151,121 in 2019 to 109,672 in 2020. There continued to be an increase in cases of victims exploited by nationals of their own country of origin, particularly among migrant workers. Traffickers among the same nationality coerce migrant workers who have been fired or abandoned by their Lebanese employer into domestic servitude or sex trafficking. NGOs reported demand for domestic workers already in Lebanon continued during the reporting period due to pandemic-related travel

restrictions and the economic crisis. NGOs reported the combined impact of the economic and financial crises and pandemic restrictions increased vulnerability of Lebanese nationals to trafficking. NGOs and international organizations reported an increase in exploitation of Lebanese adults by Lebanese nationals—particularly in industries such as custodial services—and similar to migrant workers previously filling the same jobs; these Lebanese workers were subjected to abuses, such as nonpayment of wages, poor working conditions, and excessive hours.

Women, primarily from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Morocco, and Tunisia, legally enter Lebanon to work as dancers in nightclubs through Lebanon’s *Artiste* visa program. An *Artiste* visa is valid for three months and can be renewed once. The terms of the *Artiste* visa prohibit foreign women working in these nightclubs to leave the hotel where they reside, except to work in the nightclubs that sponsor them, and nightclub owners withhold the women’s passports and wages and control their movement. Traffickers also exploit these women through physical and sexual abuse and domestic servitude. The government and NGOs reported the number of migrant domestic workers and *Artiste* visa holders entering Lebanon was significantly lower in 2021; the government reported no *Artiste* visa holders entered Lebanon in 2021, compared with 774 in 2020 and 3,376 in 2019. The government reported 29 out of 42 adult nightclubs closed permanently due to the economic crisis and pandemic-related shutdowns, after which *Artiste* visa holders either returned to their home countries or stayed in Lebanon if they found work at a different nightclub.

Adults and children among the estimated more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon are at high risk of sex trafficking and forced labor. Restrictions on Syrians’ ability to work legally in Lebanon and the enforcement of visa and residence permit laws increase this population’s vulnerability to trafficking. Syrians are commonly involved in the exploitation of other Syrians in Lebanon, particularly targeting refugees fleeing the conflict. For example, Syrian traffickers hold Syrian refugee adults and children in bonded labor to pay for food, shelter, and transit to Lebanon, and they contract out groups of refugees to work in the agricultural sector in the Bekaa Valley. Similarly, an international organization reports evidence of bonded labor within refugee communities, where child labor is used in exchange for living in informal tented settlements. Child labor and forced child labor among the Syrian refugee population continues to increase, particularly in agriculture, construction, and street vending and begging. These children are at high risk for labor trafficking, especially on the streets of main urban areas such as Beirut and Tripoli, as well as in the agricultural sectors of Bekaa and Akkar. For example, in 2019, international organizations reported the presence of children working in illegal cannabis farms in the Bekaa. NGOs report that some Syrian refugee children are forced or coerced to conduct criminal activity. Syrian refugee LGBTQI+ persons, women, girls, and some men are highly vulnerable to sex trafficking. Many women and girls who were recruited from Syria with false promises of work were subjected to commercial sexual exploitation in which they experienced mental, physical, and sexual abuse and forced abortions. Family members or powerful local families forced some Syrian refugee women and girls into commercial sex acts or early marriage to ease economic hardships; these women and girls are highly vulnerable to trafficking. Lebanese nationals fleeing the economic crisis reportedly joined Syrian refugees to migrate irregularly from north Lebanon to Cyprus and Turkey, and an international organization reported organized trafficking networks fraudulently offered Lebanese nationals false or misleading job opportunities. Syrians and Lebanese nationals traveling through these channels are vulnerable to sex trafficking in Turkey.

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Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum
Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien
T (Telephone) +43 1 589 00 583
F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
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F.A.Q.
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