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2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Lebanon

LEBANON (Tier 2 Watch List)

The Government of Lebanon does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts included continuing to investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes and convict traffickers, despite severe resource constraints, and drafting SOPs on interagency coordination. The government also partnered with a foreign government and a foreign donor to develop and approve a new victim identification toolkit and directly provided services to at least two child trafficking victims. However, the government did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period. The government identified the fewest number of victims and potential victims in 10 years. In addition, the government's policy of detaining potential victims while judges determine victims' status to confer benefits such as temporary residence and referral to services was often lengthy, re-traumatizing victims and delaying necessary assistance. Compared to the scale of the problem in Lebanon, the government's efforts to identify and protect trafficking victims remained woefully inadequate. The government entirely relied on NGOs and international organizations to provide shelter and services to trafficking victims and did not report providing financial or in-kind support to those organizations for the care of adult victims. The government did not have or implement formal victim identification or referral procedures, which resulted in potential unidentified victims being inappropriately penalized, through arrest, detention, or deportation, for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Lebanon's employer-based visa system continued to create vulnerabilities for the exploitation of migrant workers and remained a significant impediment to authorities' ability to identify and protect trafficking victims; the government did not take any steps to reform the employer-based visa system despite the extreme vulnerabilities to trafficking inherent in the system. The government has never convicted a trafficker for exploiting workers in domestic servitude, although it is a prevalent form of trafficking in Lebanon. Therefore Lebanon remained on Tier 2 Watch List for a second consecutive year.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Cease the detention of potential trafficking victims during victim recognition procedures and ensure victims and potential victims are expeditiously referred to appropriate shelter and services. * Finalize and implement government-approved procedures for officials to identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, such as undocumented or detained migrants, women holding *artiste* visas, domestic workers, and Syrian refugees, and refer all victims to protection services. * Significantly increase efforts to ensure trafficking victims are not inappropriately arrested, detained, or deported solely for unlawful acts they committed as a direct result of being trafficked, such as immigration or "prostitution" violations. * Reform the employer-based visa system to ensure all foreign workers, including domestic workers, 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, including domestic servitude, 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. * Switch *artiste* visa holders, a visa program that contributes to the vulnerability of women to and may facilitate sex trafficking, to temporary work visas that ensure full labor protections and freedom of movement under Lebanese law. * 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. * Develop and consistently enforce strong regulations and oversight of labor recruitment agencies, including by ensuring any recruitment fees are paid by employers and holding fraudulent labor recruiters criminally accountable. * Continue to partner with NGOs to screen for, identify, and provide protection services – including victim-witness assistance 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 an updated comprehensive NAP and dedicate resources to its implementation. * Improve the judiciary's capacity to collect, compile, and track data and outcomes of trafficking cases from all courts.

PROSECUTION

The government maintained anti-trafficking 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 grave crimes, such as rape. In October 2023, the Cabinet approved a drafted amendment to the 2011 anti-trafficking law to reportedly resolve issues such as placing the burden of proof on victims to prove they were exploited in trafficking. The drafted amendment was pending with parliamentary committees at the end of the reporting period; however, parliament has only met periodically to pass legislation since the start of Lebanon's presidential vacancy in October 2022.

Ongoing financial, economic, and political crises continued to affect law enforcement's ability to investigate trafficking cases and compile data. Most public-sector workers were paid in local currency and they were demanding salary increases to keep pace with rising inflation, only reporting to workplaces intermittently in protest. This has impacted the workforces of the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), and other law enforcement agencies, and has limited the government's ability to undertake effective anti-trafficking efforts and respond to information requests. Most law enforcement and judiciary offices did not have basic supplies, including electricity or fuel for vehicles or generators.

The Internal Security Forces (ISF) anti-trafficking unit was the lead law enforcement unit investigating trafficking cases; however, DGS led investigations involving foreign workers, including cases involving *artiste* visas and migrant workers. In 2023, ISF investigated 13 potential sex trafficking cases, involving 69 suspects, and one potential labor trafficking case involving one suspect. In addition, DGS investigated 81 potential cases of suspected trafficking involving migrant domestic workers and adult nightclub workers holding *artiste* visas. DGS determined that eight of the 81 cases met the criteria for trafficking cases. The 94 total investigations in 2023 was a decrease compared with the 168 investigations initiated in 2022. MOJ did not have a centralized data collection system to report standardized data on prosecutions and convictions. In 2023, the government initiated 135 new prosecutions, compared with 10 prosecutions in 2022; however, 122 of the prosecutions may have involved migrant smuggling instead of human trafficking. In 2023, courts convicted two traffickers, compared with one conviction in 2022. Courts sentenced both traffickers to six years' imprisonment and a fine. Despite domestic servitude being a prevalent form of trafficking in Lebanon, the government has never reported convicting a trafficker for such exploitation under the 2011 anti-trafficking law and has not prosecuted a domestic servitude case since 2015. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes. The government reported backlogs of trafficking cases because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2022 judicial sector strike continued to impede efforts to prosecute trafficking cases.

The ISF anti-trafficking unit remained understaffed and underfunded with only 20 officers and no field offices outside Beirut, which limited the unit's work; although organizationally separate, the anti-trafficking unit's commander and officers also comprised the ISF's moral protection unit, functionally merging the duties of the two units and further limiting the ISF's ability to investigate

trafficking cases. An international organization reported investigators sometimes failed to provide sufficient details when referring cases to prosecutors, resulting in trafficking cases being reclassified as other offenses, sometimes with lesser penalties, in the judicial system. In addition, 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, because of a lack of social services available should the child be removed from the family. The government provided anti-trafficking training to officials in partnership with international organizations and NGOs.

PROTECTION

The government decreased already weak victim identification and protection efforts and remained dependent on NGOs and international organizations to provide most victim services. In 2023, the government reported identifying 49 potential sex trafficking victims and two potential labor trafficking victims but did not report how many were officially recognized as trafficking victims, compared with at least 148 potential victims identified, nine of whom judges officially recognized as trafficking victims, in 2022. An international organization reported the government referred 33 victims and potential victims to NGOs and international organizations for assistance. In addition, an NGO reported assisting 769 trafficking victims in 2023, including 15 victims referred by the government and 107 victims referred by diplomatic missions representing the victims' home countries. An international organization reported identifying, without government assistance, 232 labor trafficking victims and nine victims of unspecified forms of trafficking. The government did not have comprehensive victim identification or referral procedures. In practice, officials continued to identify and refer trafficking victims to care on an ad hoc basis. For example, DGS used an SOP for identifying and referring trafficking victims during investigations of commercial sex cases and managing cases in the DGS detention center. The government, in coordination with a foreign donor and foreign government, developed a new victim identification toolkit which it launched in March 2024. In 2021, the government coordinated with an international organization to draft new SOPs for victim identification, but the government did not finalize or implement the SOPs for the third consecutive year. The government routinely detained potential trafficking victims until a judge could determine whether they will be granted victim status; it was unclear if victims were held in a separate facility or with individuals detained for crimes.

The Ministry of Social Affairs (MOA) reported providing medical, psycho-social, legal, and other services to two child trafficking victims. The government did not directly provide protection services to adult trafficking victims, nor funding for services for adult victims, but it continued to work in partnership with NGOs. NGOs and international organizations reported providing shelter and/or services to 341 labor trafficking victims and 35 sex trafficking victims. 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. NGOs generally referred male foreign national victims to their embassy or consulate for accommodations. The government continued implementing a longstanding MOU with an NGO whereby DGS referred female victims to an NGO-run safe house; the government did not allow victims to work while receiving assistance at the safe house. However, the NGO reported it could not accommodate child sex trafficking victims because of a lack of funding for specialized psycho-social assistance. Victim services were not time-limited or conditional upon victims' cooperation with law enforcement. MOA 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 accommodations to an increased number of their nationals, including domestic servitude victims, because of the economic crisis. The government has never established the victim assistance fund authorized in the 2014 anti-trafficking law despite coordinating with an international organization to develop an implementation decree for the fifth consecutive year.

The government continued to arrest, detain, and deport unidentified victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, such as domestic workers who fled abusive employers, undocumented migrant workers, Syrian refugees, women holding *artiste* visas, and persons in commercial sex. In addition, if a judge did not grant a victim formal status, including foreign workers without residency or work permits, officials released them from detention or charged them with the commission of a crime. An international organization reported officials often detained potential trafficking victims alongside traffickers during law enforcement operations and prosecutions. An international organization further reported the failure to proactively identify trafficking victims during law enforcement operations increased the likelihood victims were penalized for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked because judicial officials lacked understanding of trafficking. NGOs reported some foreign victims, including migrant domestic workers, sometimes chose not to file complaints or retracted testimony because of a fear of reprisal or deportation.

Under the employer-based visa 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 administrative procedures adopted in February 2021 for employers to inform DGS about domestic workers who left the workplace; these procedures replaced previously used employer complaint systems that automatically launched prosecutions of migrant workers who left their workplace. In addition, the procedures prohibited the use of certain language in official reports, including that which implied domestic workers violated employment conditions like “fled” or “ran away,” replacing them with the more neutral 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. Authorities could immediately deport women holding *artiste* visas upon arrest for alleged “prostitution” violations.

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 legal and psycho-social services. DGS also continued to permit the NGO to interview detainees to identify trafficking victims among the detention center population; the NGO reported identifying an unspecified number of trafficking victims in the detention center.

The government partnered with international organizations and civil society organizations to provide legal assistance to at least eight trafficking victims. Victims could file civil suits to obtain compensation, however, the government did not report whether courts awarded compensation to victims through civil suits. Judges could allow foreign victims to reside in Lebanon during the investigation, but the government did not report if 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. Therefore, authorities faced challenges pursuing potential trafficking cases when victims chose voluntary repatriation as they were not present in the country to testify against their traffickers and law enforcement did not often pursue other forms of evidence. The government assisted in the voluntary repatriation of 10 sex trafficking victims; separately, an international organization reported assisting in the voluntary repatriation of 178 trafficking victims. 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. Lebanese authorities continued to deport or otherwise create 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. In addition, Lebanese government officials made discriminatory statements about Syrian refugees in Lebanon further increasing their vulnerability to trafficking.

PREVENTION

The government maintained woefully inadequate efforts to prevent trafficking and the government's employer-based visa system increased migrant workers' vulnerability to trafficking. The national anti-trafficking steering committee under the National Human Rights Committee was responsible for coordinating anti-trafficking efforts but observers noted the government relied on civil society to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts and convene government agencies combating trafficking. A working group of ISF, DGS, MOSA, MOJ, Ministry of Labor (MOL), and Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials met informally. An international organization assisted MOSA to draft SOPs for interagency coordination on anti-trafficking efforts. The government remained without a NAP for the 11th consecutive year. The government provided in-kind support to an international organization-led awareness campaign and solicited input from migrant domestic workers on the campaign; in addition, the government raised awareness on trafficking issues targeting civil society organizations and vulnerable communities through a community policing project in coordination with foreign donors. DGS and MOL continued to operate hotlines to receive reports of abuse and migrant worker complaints, including suspected trafficking crimes; the government did not report receiving any trafficking-related calls or if calls resulted in investigations or identified victims. MOSA also operated a hotline for children at risk of exploitation, including potential trafficking victims. An NGO reported ISF and DGS frequently referred potential victims to the NGO's hotline.

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 at the expense of the visa holder's sponsor. However, NGOs reported the conditions of the *artiste* visa were inherently exploitative and may have facilitated sex trafficking; despite commercial sex being illegal in Lebanon, *artiste* visa holders' sponsors frequently coerced them to perform commercial sex acts to pay their debts – a practice equivalent to sex trafficking. In addition, DGS regulations for the visa program required regular screening for sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy tests, implying an expectation *artiste* visa holders engage in sexual activity despite extreme restrictions on their movement. In October 2023, DGS amended policies for the *artiste* visa, ensuring *artiste* visa holders were not confined to their hotel rooms and easing requirements to allow *artiste* visa holders to request to change employers; however, the *artiste* visa holder still had to appear in person at DGS with her current employer to request a change in employer. Under a directive from DGS, airport officers continued to return passports directly to foreign domestic workers upon their arrival in Lebanon, but NGOs reported many employers 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, weakening deterrence of the practice and increasing foreign workers' vulnerability to trafficking.

Lebanon's labor law excluded both Lebanese and foreign national domestic workers, denying them a minimum wage, limits on working hours, and other labor protections. Lebanon's employer-based visa system continued to prevent foreign workers from switching employers (without notarized employer approval) or receiving adequate access to legal recourse in response to abuse. Migrant workers, including potential trafficking victims, who left their place of employment prior to fulfilling their work contract, were considered out of status and subjected to fines and detention for their irregular presence in the country; loss of legal status created greater vulnerabilities to trafficking. 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. MOL did not report investigating, suspending, closing, or taking any enforcement actions against any recruitment agencies for labor violations or complaints of mistreating migrant domestic workers. MOL maintained a blacklist 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 did not report prosecuting any recruitment or employment agencies for potential trafficking crimes. The government did not take steps to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. 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. NGOs reported the combined impact of the economic and financial crises and previous COVID-19 pandemic restrictions increased the vulnerability of Lebanese nationals to trafficking. NGOs and international organizations report an increase in the exploitation of Lebanese adults by Lebanese nationals – particularly in industries such as custodial services – and similar to migrant workers previously filling the same jobs, employers subject these Lebanese workers to abuses indicative of labor trafficking, such as nonpayment of wages, poor working conditions, and excessive hours.

Traffickers exploit women and girls from South and Southeast Asia and an increasing number from East and West Africa in domestic servitude in Lebanon. According to an NGO, more than 250,000 migrant domestic workers were in Lebanon in 2023. Despite the ongoing economic crisis, NGOs reported recruitment agencies continued to aggressively recruit foreign national domestic workers, particularly from Nigeria and the Philippines. However, an NGO estimated approximately 50,000 migrant workers left Lebanon between the onset of the pandemic and the end of 2022. Lebanese government officials and NGOs reported most employers withhold 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 – all indicators of labor trafficking. NGOs report such abuse of domestic workers is typically underreported. Employers subsequently exploit or abuse many migrant workers who arrive in Lebanon through legal employment agencies, and some employment agencies recruit workers through fraudulent or false job offers. The government issued 39,237 visas for migrant workers in 2023, compared with 34,198 visas for migrant workers in 2022, 23,036 in 2021, 9,409 in 2020, and 33,075 in 2019. NGOs reported employers abandoned migrant domestic workers at their embassies and at an international organization because they were unable to continue paying salaries. Since cross-border fire between Hizballah and Israel began in October 2023, some employers in southern Lebanon have abandoned their migrant domestic workers at their homes to avoid cross-border fire, increasing the vulnerability of these workers to exploitation, abuse, and injury. The number of exploitation cases perpetrated by foreign nationals against their own countrymen continued to increase, particularly among migrant workers. Traffickers of the same nationality as the migrant worker coerce those who have been fired or abandoned by their Lebanese employer into domestic servitude or sex trafficking.

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. Prior to changes in regulations in October 2023, the terms of the *artiste* visa prohibited foreign women working in these nightclubs to leave the hotel where they reside, except to work in the nightclubs that sponsor them. 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 decreased during the pandemic; the government reported 921 *artiste* visa holders entered Lebanon in 2023, compared with 480 in 2022, none in 2021, 774 in 2020, and 3,376 in 2019. The government reported approximately 38 out of 42 adult nightclubs closed permanently because of 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 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon are at high risk of sex and labor trafficking. Restrictions on Syrians' ability to work legally in Lebanon and the enforcement of residency 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 or from Lebanon, and they contract out groups of refugees to work in the agricultural sector in the Beka'a Valley. Similarly, an international organization reported evidence of bonded labor in refugee communities where child labor is used in exchange for housing 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 Beka'a and Akkar. International organizations previously reported the presence of children working in illegal cannabis farms in the Beka'a. NGOs report that some Syrian refugee children are forced or coerced to conduct criminal activity. In 2022, an international organization reported 65 percent of children in detention in Lebanon were Syrian and likely included trafficking victims detained for crimes they were forced to commit as a direct result of being trafficked, such as theft and begging. Syrian refugee LGBTQI+ persons, women, girls, and some men are highly vulnerable to sex trafficking. Criminal groups recruited women and girls from Syria with false promises of work and subsequently exploited them in sex trafficking 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, Italy, and Türkiye, 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 Türkiye. NGOs and international organizations reported non-state armed groups, including Hizballah, Fatah al-Islam, Jund Ansar Allah, Saraya al-Muqawama, and ISIS, recruited or used child soldiers in 2021, 2022, and 2023; refugee children, particularly children residing in Palestinian refugee camps, were especially vulnerable to recruitment or use as child soldiers.