

# 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report:

## Uzbekistan

### UZBEKISTAN (Tier 2)

The Government of Uzbekistan 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; therefore, Uzbekistan remained on Tier 2. These efforts included passing a law to include human trafficking as a form of child exploitation and increased investigations and convictions involving reported trafficking crimes. The government increased the number of trafficking victims identified and assisted, including through NGO partnerships, and increased the overall funds allocated for victim protection and assistance. The government established new guidance to enable the Labor Inspectorate to conduct unannounced inspections. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. While the national government continued to enforce a ban on forced labor in the cotton harvest, some local officials allegedly continued to create pressures to meet production targets. Existing laws establishing forced labor as an administrative violation at the first offense continued to hinder overall anti-trafficking efforts. Official complicity at local levels remained a significant concern, and penalties for complicit officials were lower than those prescribed by the law. Efforts to identify victims of forced labor remained inadequate. Article 135 of the criminal code continued to allow house arrest in lieu of imprisonment for convicted sex traffickers, unlike sentences for other grave crimes.

### PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Amend the provision, under Article 148 (2) of the Criminal Code, to remove the option for administrative violations for first time offenders of adult forced labor and ensure criminalization.
- Proactively identify trafficking victims, including by screening those in forced labor, and refer all victims to appropriate services, including by allowing authorized ministries and local officials to grant official victim status, ensuring the NRM establishes clear roles and responsibilities among ministries, training all first responders in identification and referrals, and collaborating with civil society in the process without delaying victim access to care.
- Vigorously enforce the national ban on forced labor in cotton production and exercise greater oversight over local authorities to prohibit their utilization of mobilization practices, including by increasing monitoring of the harvest and removing the obligation of local officials to ensure the fulfillment of production targets, and strengthen efforts to ensure all citizens are aware of their “right to refuse” participation in other work outside their professional duties.
- Vigorously investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, including complicit officials, which should involve significant prison terms, and strengthen training for law enforcement on anti-trafficking legislation and understanding human trafficking, including forced labor.
- Sufficiently increase the number of labor inspectors and provide them with systemic, specialized training to identify forced labor victims.
- Strengthen the labor inspectorate by instructing it to report potential trafficking cases to law enforcement and by allowing unfettered access to private enterprises, including farms, cotton and silk clusters, factories, and construction sites for unannounced inspections.

- Continue to grant and expand the access of independent observers to monitor cotton cultivation and ensure full access and protection.
- Increase issuance and oversight of worker contracts in the cotton and silk sectors and ensure workers are aware of mechanisms to report complaints and forced labor cases.
- Amend Article 135 of the Criminal Code to prevent allowing house arrest in lieu of imprisonment for sex trafficking crimes and ensure penalties are commensurate with those prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape.
- Enable civil society and labor activists to operate freely, including by ensuring local governments do not interfere with the formation of labor unions and by removing obstacles to streamline and increase the registration of anti-trafficking NGOs and facilitate their work.
- Strengthen the victim-witness assistance program to increase protective services for victims participating in the criminal justice process and train law enforcement and judicial officials to use victim-centered approaches during investigations and court proceedings and to proactively seek victim restitution in criminal cases.
- Ensure victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, particularly for illegal border crossings or loss of personal identification documents.

## PROSECUTION

The government maintained law enforcement efforts.

Article 135 of the criminal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of three to five years' imprisonment for offenses involving an adult victim and eight to 12 years' imprisonment for those involving a child victim, which were sufficiently stringent. However, with respect to sex trafficking, by allowing for house arrest in lieu of imprisonment, these penalties were not commensurate with those prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape. Inconsistent with the definition of trafficking under international law, Article 135 established the use of force, fraud, or coercion as aggravating factors rather than essential elements of the crime. Article 148 (2) of the criminal code addressed "administrative forced labor." Such offenses involving adult victims were only considered administrative violations for first time offenses; repeated offenses were penalized with a fine or imprisonment of up to two years. Article 148 (2) criminalized all "administrative forced labor" offenses involving children with a fine or up to three years' imprisonment. Civil society and government contacts alike have noted these provisions, coupled with limited capacity to identify the crime among judicial officials and front line officers, significantly constrained the government's ability to prosecute and convict labor traffickers. In December 2024, the Senate approved a draft law amending the criminal code to increase penalties for human trafficking and introduce new aggravating circumstances for consideration in criminal proceedings, including crimes involving kidnapping, the utilization of violence or threats, and crimes against minors; it remained pending enactment until signed by the president.

In 2024, the government reported initiating 151 investigations, including 136 for sex trafficking and 15 for labor trafficking. This compared with 135 investigations initiated in 2023. The government reported prosecuting 85 defendants, including 83 for sex trafficking and two for forced labor. This compared with prosecuting 91 defendants in 2023. The government reported convicting 115 traffickers (113 for sex trafficking and two for labor trafficking), compared with 72 in 2023. While the government provided some information on sentencing, it was unclear which penalties traffickers specifically received. Observers noted courts and law enforcement agencies lacked sufficient resources and had a backlog of cases, including on trafficking. Authorities reported challenges in investigating transnational trafficking cases because of limited information shared by foreign authorities. Nonetheless, several Uzbekistani traffickers were extradited back to Uzbekistan after extradition requests from the government and joint law enforcement operations, including from Türkiye and Russia.

The Ministry of Interior (MVD) had a division exclusively dedicated to anti-trafficking efforts and the Labor Inspectorate was responsible for conducting inspections, including checks for forced labor indicators. The government created a new diplomatic posting for MVD personnel at the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Russia with the goal of strengthening transnational cooperation in combating human trafficking, organized crime, extremism, and other crimes. Law enforcement efforts to address labor trafficking were constrained by lack of resources, poor interagency coordination and information sharing, frequent staff turnover, and corruption. Government officials viewed forced labor as a separate crime from human trafficking, which hindered victim identification, prevented some victims from accessing services they were entitled to, and caused underreporting of trafficking. The government's requirement for law enforcement to obtain oral, written, or videotaped victim testimony inhibited law enforcement's ability to fully investigate trafficking crimes. The government continued to provide trafficking-specific training, seminars, and conferences to police, judges, immigration officers, and other government officials, including the labor inspectorate, and conducted some activities in partnership with international organizations, NGOs, and foreign donors.

The Labor Inspectorate charged 29 officials with misdemeanors for complicity in forced labor; however, the government did not provide information on resolution of these cases or fines or penalties applied. This compared with 31 officials administratively penalized in 2023. Observers reported law enforcement investigated trafficking cases involving allegedly complicit officials only when there was public attention; some individuals with political connections allegedly went unpunished for crimes they committed, including trafficking.

## PROTECTION

The government increased protection efforts.

Authorities identified and referred 186 trafficking victims in 2024, compared with 193 identified and referred in 2023. Of the 186 victims, 175 were sex trafficking victims and 11 were forced labor victims, compared with 111 sex trafficking victims and 82 forced labor victims in 2023. Twenty-two Uzbekistani citizens were identified as trafficking victims in other countries, including Türkiye, Russia, India, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The government did not identify any foreign national victims but reported they were entitled to the same benefits as citizens of Uzbekistan. NGOs identified an additional 44 victims, all female victims of sex trafficking. The government reported all 230 identified trafficking victims received government-supported services, compared with 72 victims in the previous reporting period.

The government had formal procedures for victim identification and referral to care, which outlined ministries authorized to make initial victim identification designations and approve victims for receipt of government assistance, after which cases would be referred to local trafficking commissions for final verification of official victim status. However, the government's referral procedures did not clearly outline the roles and responsibilities among key ministries, and a lack of training on the procedures impeded implementation. Officials authorized to identify trafficking victims could refer victims to either a state-run shelter or NGOs for services. The government reported victims could receive government-funded services before obtaining verification of official victim status, but only after preliminary identification from the government's regional commissions or other agencies responsible for implementing the formal procedures, and victims could receive more assistance after the regional commissions granted verification of official victim status, emphasizing some delays in victim access to care. Due to inconsistent screening among vulnerable populations, the government did not take effective measures to prevent the inappropriate penalization of potential victims solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Some victims were reluctant to contact or cooperate with law enforcement because of a distrust of authorities, a fear for their personal and familial safety, and social stigmatization. Current law did not explicitly exempt transnational trafficking victims from facing a criminal penalty for illegally crossing international borders. Local officials regularly referred victims who did not wish to pursue a criminal case to NGO offices for assistance.

The government allocated 2.957 billion som (\$228,193) for victim protection and assistance, compared with a total of 1.961 billion som (\$158,994) during the previous reporting period. The government also maintained a fund to assist Uzbekistani workers in destination countries. The government continued to provide in-kind support to local NGOs for the provision of victim assistance, such as food and clothing. The government-run shelter in Tashkent provided victims with medical, psychological, social, and legal assistance, which assisted 113 victims, including 23 men, 65 women, 14 boys, and 11 girls, compared with 113 victims in 2023. Child victims were placed in specialized centers, separate from adults. Additionally, the government enacted a law “On the Protection of Children from All Forms of Violence,” which strengthens measures to protect children from all forms of exploitation including human trafficking. The government also operated centers to assist victims of violence throughout the country, which could include trafficking victims. Observers previously noted victim services and reintegration efforts were underfunded and stressed a need for more trafficking victim shelters, including outside Tashkent. Civil society observers previously noted the cumbersome process and ongoing delays in NGO registration, as well as additional requirements that created obstacles to their work and constrained civil society efforts to assist victims and monitor trafficking, including in the cotton harvest.

The government provided and funded legal assistance to trafficking victims, including for lawyers and other specialists. The law mandated security measures to protect victims and witnesses during investigations, including measures to ensure victims’ privacy, but did not require other types of support. Experts previously reported the government did not adequately ensure victims’ or witnesses’ protection in court trials and indicated that some individuals were verbally attacked and threatened. The government noted victims were not obligated to appear in person for preliminary proceedings and could provide testimony via audio or video; however, it did not report making use of such approaches. The government did not report how many victims were involved in criminal investigations or prosecutions. In 2024, courts awarded 17 victims with monetary compensation for damages in the amount of 101.5 million som (\$10,781), compared with court orders for 10 victims to receive compensation in 2024.

## PREVENTION

The government maintained prevention efforts.

The National Commission on Combating Trafficking in Persons and Decent Work (the Commission) met four times in 2024. The Sub-Commission on Decent Work led efforts to address internal forced labor, and the Sub-Commission on Combating Trafficking in Persons led efforts to address other types of trafficking, including cases of forced labor involving Uzbekistani citizens abroad. The Commission directed the activities of regional commissions in 12 regions, one semi-autonomous republic, and one independent city (Tashkent). The Commission continued to implement an action plan to combat online trafficking. The government reported allocation of 63.9 billion som (\$4.93 million) for anti-trafficking efforts, including prevention and protection. However, the government did not centrally allocate funding for the Commission, which instead required funding contributions from individual member ministries’ budgets. Authorities continued to conduct public awareness campaigns, some in collaboration with civil society. The central government continued to conduct awareness campaigns regarding the prohibition on forced labor.

Representatives from civil society reported no systemic forced labor in the annual cotton harvest for the fourth consecutive year but noted a small number of scattered instances of forced labor persisted. The central government maintained some oversight of the harvest and conducted awareness campaigns regarding the prohibition on forced labor. Observers reported isolated cases of children working in the fields, usually with their parents, to pick cotton. Some civil society members noted the existence of district-level “production targets” which could be construed as de facto quotas and create opportunities for coercion, increasing the vulnerability to forced labor. One observer reported while *mahalla* (local government) employees attempted to follow the law, they could be punished for not mobilizing sufficient cotton pickers. Observers reported that out of the instances of forced labor found during the cotton harvest, some involved perceived threats rather

than explicit coercion; there was an expectation and belief that refusal resulted in negative consequences from the *mahalla* or employers. Observers previously reported clusters did not typically face any penalties from local officials when they violated contract obligations with farmers, such as significant delays of payments for cotton delivered, and some officials may perceive an obligation to protect the interests of certain clusters or reportedly owned a cluster. Cotton pickers often did not have contracts or were unaware of their existence, which civil society and international observers agreed was a key vulnerability for pickers.

Brigade leaders, often from the *mahalla* where most of the pickers lived, acted as middlepersons and signed contracts with clusters or farmers on behalf of a group of pickers, which observers previously reported could create opportunities for embezzlement. One civil society report indicated ongoing development of the privatized cluster system inadvertently generated other trafficking vulnerabilities, including avenues for private businesses to subject harvest workers to contract violations, loss of bargaining power or choice of cluster affiliation, and coerced cultivation of cotton. Observers previously noted the absence of a legal framework to ensure oversight of worker contracts, including in farming, and, during the 2024 cotton harvest, most seasonal pickers did not appear to have contracts. One civil society organization reported, in some instances, individuals felt threatened by the loss of social benefits, the termination of employment, or other reprisals if they refused to participate in the harvest as cotton pickers and some were asked to pay for replacement pickers.

The government continued to allow independent monitoring of the cotton harvest for child and forced labor, with unimpeded access to the cotton fields for observations and to interview laborers. The government continued to issue official monitoring access permits to civil society groups. The MEPR, the Federation of Trade Unions, and the Confederation of Employers had a Commission to conduct child and forced labor monitoring, and the government contracted independent monitors for the annual cotton harvest. One NGO previously reported instances of harassment by clusters during monitoring missions of some cotton clusters. The State Labor Inspectorate employed 411 inspectors that could impose administrative penalties. The Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction received 283 complaints about labor rights violations, including reports related to forced labor and delayed wage payments during the cotton harvest.

Some civil society members reported the central government continued to set silk cocoon production quotas and claimed forced and coercive labor practices existed in this sector. Previously reported NGO accounts of forced labor in the silk cocoon harvest alleged direct local government involvement and that some silk cocoon clusters forced farmers to sign compulsory contracts, requiring them to provide a specific amount of silk cocoons for every hectare of land. Farmers who failed to produce the required quota reportedly risked land expropriation; however, there were no confirmed reports of land expropriation. The government did not report efforts to monitor the silk sector; however, production was usually home-based and done by families, reportedly including children. Half of the population of Uzbekistan worked in the informal sector; civil society has noted this includes the cotton and silk sectors, which makes it difficult for independent observers to monitor social protections and the application of labor regulations.

Uzbekistan's Agency for External Labor Migration (AELM) provided financial, social, and legal assistance to Uzbekistani workers in destination countries and assistance in finding employment for returnees. In October 2024, the government passed "On Priority Measures to Reform the Migration Management System," which eliminated AELM and established the new Migration Agency under the Cabinet of Ministers as of January 2025. The Migration Agency is tasked with undertaking AELM's previous duties including regulating external labor migration processes, conducting trainings for laborers with potential work opportunities outside of Uzbekistan, and providing legal and social assistance to Uzbekistani citizens working abroad.

The government, in cooperation with an NGO, provided information and support for laborers on safe work abroad and their rights. The government worked with private recruitment agencies to secure work contracts for workers in Russia, Türkiye, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, the UK, and some countries in Central and Eastern Europe and had representative offices in Russia, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, the UAE, the Republic of Korea, and Japan. The government maintained agreements to

enhance coordination on labor migration with Russia, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Republic of Korea, Japan, and Qatar. Labor recruitment laws in Uzbekistan prohibited charging workers recruitment fees.

Labor inspectors were not empowered to bring criminal charges for first time violations of the law against forced labor and did not have the authority to refer victims to services without first referring them to law enforcement. International observers noted some inspectors also demonstrated limited comfort with their administrative enforcement mandate and that inspections often only occurred at the request of law enforcement or after receiving complaints. The Labor Inspectorate received 22,985 labor complaints, which it reported investigating; however, no forced labor cases were identified in those investigations. Observers noted the Labor Inspectorate was underfunded, understaffed, and had high turnover, though in late 2024, the State Labor Inspectorate began conducting unannounced labor inspections without needing prior approval from the Business Ombudsperson.

The MVD operated a hotline, and the Commission maintained a website to identify human trafficking victims and refer them to services. The hotline received 704 requests for assistance in 2024, a notable increase from 111 in 2023. The government also operated a 24-hour hotline that provided Uzbekistani workers abroad with legal advice and directed them to the nearest consulate for assistance. An NGO operated a widely publicized 24/7 anti-trafficking hotline in 13 regional centers. Observers previously noted most pickers in the cotton harvest were not aware of any government hotline to report forced labor. The government continued to fund a public research firm to assess awareness of human trafficking among the population and the causes of the crime. The government did not conduct efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. The government reported providing anti-trafficking training for its diplomatic personnel.

## **TRAFFICKING PROFILE:**

Trafficking affects all communities. This section summarizes government and civil society reporting on the nature and scope of trafficking over the past five years. Human traffickers exploit Uzbekistani victims domestically and abroad, and some foreign nationals are vulnerable to trafficking in Uzbekistan. While international observers agree the government has successfully abolished systemic forced labor in the annual cotton harvest, some civil society observers have reported isolated instances of forced labor by local officials. One civil society organization reported that, due to pressure from local authorities to meet cotton production targets, some employees from state institutions and banks and individuals that receive social benefits were mobilized to pick cotton by local officials. Private companies in some regions mobilize employees for the harvest. Some civil society activists allege that farmers are forced to vacate and remit their land to private cotton operators, including in the cluster sites established on their former land. This could make them vulnerable to forced labor because of a disruption of livelihoods and the ensuing economic hardships. Observers reported sudden-onset disasters, such as drought, could increase the movement of people that depend on farming from rural areas, increasing their vulnerabilities to exploitation.

Some civil society observers have reported some local officials provide silkworms to farmers and force them to sign contracts stating they will agree to cultivate silk cocoons in furtherance of production quotas. International observers noted the majority of farmers do not have written contracts with silk clusters, which makes them vulnerable to forced labor. Despite a 2018 government prohibition on the practice and new protections for teachers written into the revised 2023 constitution, some local officials continue to force teachers to perform voluntary work inconsistent with their contractual duties, such as supporting community events. In previous years, some local officials forced students (including children), private businesses' employees, and others to work in other forms of non-cotton agriculture and to clean parks, streets, and buildings. Officials have previously cast these compulsory tasks as part of Uzbekistan's traditional *Hashar* system, under which community members are expected to perform voluntary work for communal benefit. Due to high levels of informal employment, which include lack of contracts, individuals in the

construction sector are vulnerable to trafficking. Some Uzbekistani citizens are vulnerable to police abuse, extortion, and coercion into pornography and informant roles on the basis of their sexual orientation or identity; widespread social stigma and discrimination based on sexual orientation or identity also compound their vulnerability to family-brokered forced marriages that may feature corollary sex trafficking or forced labor indicators. Children in institutions are vulnerable to sex trafficking. Some children are vulnerable to forced criminality in drug trafficking. According to 2024 data from international experts, approximately 14 percent of children live in poverty and many work to help their families, facing high risks for trafficking. An estimated 3,000 displaced Afghans in Uzbekistan on short-term visas are vulnerable to trafficking because of inadequate access to public services and employment opportunities, compounded by instances of harassment from authorities. Traffickers exploit Uzbekistani nationals domestically in brothels, clubs, and private residences. Illegal mining operations of gold and other precious metals exist in some regions of the country, making some individuals vulnerable to forced labor.

Traffickers exploit Uzbekistani nationals in sex trafficking and forced labor in the Middle East, including in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE; in Europe, including Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Latvia, Moldova, Russia, and Türkiye; and in Central, South, and East Asia, including in Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia, and Thailand, respectively. Uzbekistani nationals are subjected to forced labor in these regions in the construction, transportation, oil and gas, agricultural, retail, and food sectors. Observers noted an increased use of online recruitment by traffickers, primarily for forced labor. Uzbekistani nationals are subjected to forced criminality in cyber scam operations and forced labor in cryptocurrency mining in Burma and Laos. Hundreds of thousands of Uzbekistani workers are at elevated risk of trafficking in Russia, where employers and authorities charge high work permit fees that catalyze debt-based coercion, subject them to poor living and working conditions, and garnish or withhold their wages; these vulnerabilities are often compounded by Russian employers' failure to register Uzbekistani workers with the relevant authorities. Russia continues to attract the vast majority of Uzbekistani laborers moving abroad.

Uzbekistani citizens traveling to the United States through multiple countries, including Latin America and Europe, are vulnerable to trafficking. Uzbekistanis who have moved abroad for employment, particularly those who have become inmates in Russian prisons, are vulnerable to forced recruitment or under the promise of fast-tracked citizenship to fight in the Russia-Ukraine war. Some Uzbekistani laborers are recruited to work in construction in Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia, where their passports are confiscated. Some Uzbekistani men working in Türkiye are recruited by terrorist organizations to fight in Syria. Uzbekistani men who traveled to Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan to fight alongside or seek employment in armed groups brought their families with them, at times under deception. The Uzbekistani citizens left in these conflict zones, including children, are at risk of trafficking, including in camps in Syria. Uzbekistani children in these camps are at risk of recruitment by armed groups.