

2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Rwanda

RWANDA (Tier 2 Watch List)

The Government of Rwanda does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts included prosecuting and convicting more traffickers, referring the majority of identified victims to care, and regularly convening the national counter trafficking committee to coordinate government efforts. However, the government did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period. The government investigated fewer trafficking cases and identified fewer trafficking victims. The government did not have SOPs for victim identification and referral to care, hindering overall protection efforts. Due to a lack of formal identification procedures, authorities likely penalized unidentified trafficking victims, including children, solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Observers reported children were forcibly and fraudulently recruited as child soldiers for use in combat and support roles. Therefore Rwanda was downgraded to Tier 2 Watch List.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Cease coordination with and support to armed groups recruiting or using child soldiers, including in support roles. * Develop formal SOPs for victim identification and referral to care and train stakeholders on their use. * Proactively identify trafficking victims by screening for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations, including among GBV victims, persons in commercial sex, LGBTQI+ individuals, children experiencing homelessness, and refugees and foreign nationals residing at government transit centers. * Hold officials criminally accountable for complicity in human trafficking, including for support to non-state armed groups that forcibly or fraudulently recruit or use child soldiers. * Continue to increase efforts to investigate and prosecute alleged traffickers, including for both transnational and internal trafficking crimes, and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms. * Conduct additional training and capacity building for law enforcement agencies on recognizing and combating internal forms of trafficking. * Expand victim and shelter services, including for male victims. * Implement and consistently enforce strong regulations and oversight of the labor sector, including training labor inspectors to identify and report trafficking crimes and holding employers or labor recruiters criminally accountable for crimes committed. * Ensure victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. * Develop and implement a centralized data system to track the government's efforts to combat trafficking crimes, with data disaggregated by type of trafficking, and train law enforcement and immigration officials in relevant ministries on its use.

PROSECUTION

The government decreased anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. The 2018 anti-trafficking law criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking. The law prescribed penalties of 10 to 15 years' imprisonment and a fine of 10 million to 15 million Rwandan francs (\$9,430 to \$14,150), which increased to 20 to 25 years' imprisonment and a fine of 20 million to 25 million Rwandan francs (\$18,870 to \$23,580) if the crime was transnational in nature. The law prescribed penalties of five to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of 5 million to 10 million Rwandan francs (\$4,720 to \$9,430) for labor trafficking crimes. These penalties were sufficiently stringent, and with regard to sex trafficking, commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as rape. However, the law defined trafficking broadly to include illegal adoption without the purpose of exploitation, sexual intercourse for the purpose of exploitation, as well as the sale of organs and other body parts.

The government initiated 21 trafficking investigations involving 40 suspects (nine sex trafficking cases, 11 labor trafficking cases, and one unspecified form of trafficking). This compared with 74 investigations during the previous reporting period. The government prosecuted 19 defendants in 15 cases compared with nine defendants in six cases in the previous reporting period. The government convicted 24 traffickers, compared with six in the previous reporting period. The government did not report sentences issued for these convictions, and three defendants were acquitted. The government reported cooperation with foreign counterparts on 12 of the 21 investigations. Scarce resources, lack of training, limited capacity, and conflation of human trafficking with other crimes continued to hinder overall law enforcement efforts. The government disproportionately focused on transnational trafficking cases and did not take adequate action to address internal trafficking crimes.

The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes. Children were allegedly forcibly and fraudulently recruited from Rwandan refugee camps to use as child soldiers in combat and support roles in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The government continued its provisions of material support to and coordinated with the March 23 Movement (M23), a non-state armed group that forcibly and fraudulently recruited and used child soldiers. The government signed a mutual legal assistance agreement with Uganda to increase law enforcement cooperation, including on trafficking in persons cases. The government, with funding from international organizations, trained investigators and immigration officials on human trafficking. The government trained the Rwanda National Police on general offenses and penalties, including anti-trafficking laws; these training courses were funded by the government. NGOs reported a need for gender-specific identification protocols as well as guidance for law enforcement officials on how to collect evidence for use in prosecuting cases. The government did not have a central repository of trafficking data from all law enforcement agencies, which hindered coordination on trafficking cases.

PROTECTION

The government made mixed protection efforts. The government identified 75 trafficking victims (28 for sex trafficking, 45 for labor trafficking, and two for unspecified forms of trafficking), compared with 263 victims identified in the previous reporting period. The government reported referring 60 victims to services compared with no victims referred in the previous reporting period. An NGO reported it provided services without government support to three female trafficking victims in 2023. The government did not have SOPs for victim identification or an NRM to refer victims to care. In the absence of formal procedures, the government reported some officials relied on the East African Community Standard Operating Procedures for human trafficking. Sources reported a lack of SOPs and an NRM to identify and refer potential trafficking victims, including from underserved communities, hindered victim identification efforts and victims' access to services.

The government dedicated 933 million Rwandan francs (\$746,500) for victim services, including trafficking, compared with 306 million Rwandan francs (\$171,040) in 2022. The government continued to operate its network of 44 Isange one-stop centers, located in district capitals and hospitals, to assist GBV and trafficking victims. The centers offered short-term shelter and psycho-social, medical, and legal services and could accommodate children; the government did not report how many trafficking victims it assisted at these centers. The government reported victims would generally stay at the centers for three days, after which victims could choose between longer-term shelter or independent living options. The government continued its collaboration with an international organization to train protection actors and counselors at the centers on the identification of trafficking victims and their referral to services. NGOs reported the centers would primarily focus on the needs of female victims, negatively affecting readiness to assist male victims, and did not always have the capacity to address the needs of trafficking victims.

Observers reported four shelters affiliated with NGOs and several government-affiliated safe houses could also offer services to trafficking victims. The long-term government shelters provided up to six months of services for trafficking and GBV victims. The extent and quality of services

varied between locations, and social workers did not always screen to identify trafficking victims among GBV victims. The government reported foreign victims had the same access to services as Rwandans. However, sources noted that some vulnerable groups, such as those who fled conflict in eastern DRC, were not eligible to access Isange one-stop centers. The government did not report providing any services (counseling, medical care, education, or vocational training) to former child soldiers compared with an unspecified number of children who received such services in the previous reporting period. NGOs offered general assistance and support in refugee camps, but a lack of capacity and resources inhibited the implementation of effective protection, procedures, screening, and assistance to trafficking victims in refugee camps.

The anti-trafficking law stated trafficking victims should not be penalized for their involvement in any unlawful activity that was a direct consequence of being trafficked. However, due to a lack of formal identification procedures, authorities may have arrested and detained some unidentified trafficking victims. The government continued operating transit centers, which, according to the government, are temporary facilities used for people exhibiting “deviant behavior that is harmful to the public,” such as “prostitution, drug use, begging, vagrancy, or informal street vending.” Advocacy groups and NGOs reported authorities, such as police and the District Administration Security Support Organ, detained vulnerable persons and potential trafficking victims at transit centers – including individuals in commercial sex, adults and children experiencing homelessness, members of the LGBTQI+ community, foreign nationals, and children in street vending and forced begging – and did not adequately screen for trafficking indicators among them. The government held many potential victims of trafficking in these centers, which functioned as de facto detention facilities, for up to six months. Observers further noted authorities often released detainees back on the streets without notice, exposing them to possible revictimization. Sources also reported that some suspected victims, including children, were detained in transit centers without proper screening and referral to services. While some centers provided identified victims with psychological counseling, education, vocational training, job placement, and reintegration services, not all transit centers offered the same services. Observers reported officials did not follow victim referral procedures with respect to the LGBTQI+ community and individuals in commercial sex due to widespread cultural prejudice. Rwanda’s Nkamira transit center on the border with the DRC had 6,000 asylum-seekers residing there as of March 2024 and received approximately 15 new arrivals per day. Observers reported some asylum-seekers have been at the center for more than a year; several thousand more have been moved to refugee camps around Rwanda without refugee status determinations.

The government reported having a dedicated budget to repatriate Rwandans overseas. However, observers noted Rwanda’s relatively limited diplomatic presence often made it difficult for Rwandan officials abroad to provide assistance to trafficking victims. Media and NGOs reported victims could receive support packages of 250,000 Rwandan francs (\$200) upon reintegration into their home communities; however, the government did not report providing this assistance to any victims.

The government reported 60 victims participated in investigations and prosecutions, compared with 48 victims in the previous reporting period. The government reported it provided victim-witness assistance to support participation in criminal justice proceedings by providing protection services such as personal security and access to shelters. The law also protected the identity of victims by allowing court proceedings to be conducted by camera and permitting the use of a video link. The government, in coordination with an international organization, continued operation of a child-friendly space, which could provide assistance to trafficking victims participating in court proceedings. Foreign national victims were eligible to obtain employment and remain in Rwanda during trial proceedings. The law allowed victims to obtain restitution in criminal prosecutions, file civil suits against traffickers for civil damages, and stated victims were exempt from paying any associated filing fees. The government reported awarding restitution to one trafficking victim during the reporting period.

PREVENTION

The government maintained efforts to prevent trafficking. The inter-agency national counter trafficking committee continued to lead national anti-trafficking efforts and convened regularly. The government maintained and began updates to its 2021 NAP. The government, in partnership with an international organization and other stakeholders, conducted awareness-raising campaigns and continued to use media and radio programs to increase community awareness of trafficking, particularly in schools and vulnerable communities in border areas. The Rwanda Investigation Bureau, Rwanda National Police, and other government agencies continued to operate hotlines for reporting crimes, including trafficking; one NGO operated hotline received two calls related to trafficking. These hotlines accommodated speakers in English, French, Kinyarwanda, and Kiswahili; were advertised in public awareness campaigns on TV, radio, and social media; and were available 24 hours a day.

The government had policies to regulate labor recruitment companies. These policies required their registration with the Rwanda Development Board, licensing from the Ministry of Labor, submission of monthly reports to the government, writing labor contracts in one of the official languages and in a language that both the employee and employer understand, and including salary, date of payment, and dispute settlement procedures in employment contracts. The government did not report efforts to enforce such policies or provide oversight to labor recruitment companies. The government did not permit international labor brokers to operate in Rwanda. The government reported conducting labor inspections. The government reported labor inspectors and local authorities were trained to identify forced labor; however, sources reported the limited number of inspectors and insufficient funds hindered the government's efforts. The government made some efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts, including by raising awareness of human trafficking among potential buyers.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Rwanda, and traffickers exploit victims from Rwanda abroad. Traffickers subject Rwandan men, women, and children to sex trafficking and forced labor in domestic work, as well as in the agricultural, mining, industrial, and service sectors. Traffickers exploit Rwandan women and girls in forced labor, specifically in domestic service, bars, and restaurants, and exploit men and boys in forced labor in mines and on plantations. NGOs reported cultural norms minimized laborers' rights and consequently made identifying forced labor difficult. Sources reported traffickers used fraudulent marriage contracts to subject victims to trafficking. Child labor, including potential trafficking, in Rwanda is most prevalent in agriculture, illegal mining, and construction. Traffickers sometimes exploit Rwandan young adults in sex trafficking in hotels, at times with the cooperation of hotel owners.

Traffickers subject Rwandan adults and children to sex trafficking and forced labor in domestic work, agricultural, industrial, and service sectors abroad, including in East Africa, Southern Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Traffickers transited victims through Uganda and Tanzania before reaching final destinations that included African, East Asian, and Middle Eastern countries. Traffickers take advantage of a trilateral immigration agreement to transport trafficking victims across Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda. Observers reported Rwandans are exploited in sex trafficking in karaoke bars and nightclubs in Kenya.

Sources reported increased vulnerability to trafficking among Rwandans due to the COVID-19 pandemic's lasting impact on the economy. An NGO reported the pandemic exacerbated instances of forced begging. Observers report some parents receive compensation for allowing traffickers to exploit their children in forced begging. Traffickers target vulnerable populations such as youth, including those experiencing homelessness, orphaned children, children with disabilities, women and girls, adults arrested for commercial sex, unemployed adults, undocumented migrants, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced persons. International organizations reported traffickers entice young girls into domestic servitude and in some cases force them into sex trafficking. Traffickers in neighboring countries continue to pose as labor recruitment agents to recruit and transport small numbers of victims through the country. Traffickers deceive parents with false promises of better

opportunities but then exploit children in domestic servitude or child sex trafficking. Traffickers increasingly recruit victims through social media, phone apps and online job portals. Additionally, traffickers may use location tracking features to monitor and control victims' movement.

International organizations reported concerns that children in refugee camps were vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups operating in the DRC and noted Rwandan children were among those demobilized from armed groups in the DRC. As in the previous reporting period, the government provided material support to and coordinated with M23, a non-state armed group operating in the DRC that recruited and used child soldiers. During the reporting period, children were allegedly forcibly and fraudulently recruited from Rwandan refugee camps for use as child soldiers by armed groups in the DRC. As of February 2024, Rwanda hosted 135,298 refugees and asylum-seekers, mainly from the DRC and Burundi. Refugees fleeing conflict and political violence in Burundi and the DRC remain highly vulnerable to trafficking in Rwanda due to difficulties finding employment and acute food insecurity, and some are exploited by traffickers in other countries after transiting Rwanda. Observers reported that refugee children, particularly girls, orphans, and young people were at greater risk of trafficking. Researchers have reported some parents in refugee camps receive money in exchange for their children's work in domestic service or in the commercial sex industry. Media sources report that refugees in Rwanda face discrimination and most refugees have limited economic opportunities, which increased vulnerability to trafficking. The government pursued agreements with a third country to host asylum-seekers, which anti-trafficking experts reported may likely increase vulnerabilities to trafficking.