

2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Central African Republic

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC (Tier 2)

The Government of the Central African Republic (CAR) does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore CAR remained on Tier 2. The government adopted a comprehensive anti-trafficking law, which strengthened existing criminal provisions within the penal code and included new provisions on victim protection and prevention efforts. The government investigated more trafficking crimes and trained law enforcement, security forces, and public sector employees on the new anti-trafficking law. The government revised its standard operating procedures on victim identification and referral to services, which now required law enforcement officers to screen for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations. The government also coordinated with international organizations to demobilize and provide reintegration services to child soldiers, cease the detention of former child soldiers, and increase prevention efforts to minimize their re-recruitment by armed groups. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government did not report any prosecutions or convictions of traffickers and victim services remained inadequate. Official complicity in human trafficking continued to remain a significant concern.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS: ✓

- Vigorously investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, including complicit officials, which should involve significant prison terms.
- Appoint a specialized prosecutor to focus solely on trafficking crimes.
- Using the established SOPs, systematically and proactively identify trafficking victims, including among vulnerable populations.
- Work with civil society to increase public awareness of human trafficking crimes.
- Allocate additional in-kind and financial resources from relevant ministries to support the Mixed Unit for Rapid Intervention and Repression of Sexual Violence to Women and Children's (UMIRR) operations.
- Increase the number of court hearings, separate from informal mediation, for suspected trafficking cases.
- Ensure trafficking victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked.
- In collaboration with international organizations and NGOs, increase the quantity and quality of victim services.
- Cease the recruitment or use of child soldiers by all government forces, hold complicit officials accountable, and expand efforts to sensitize national security forces on CAR's anti-child soldiering directives.
- Cease support to and coordination with non-state armed groups, including the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group, that recruit or use child soldiers, including children who took a direct part in hostilities and in support roles.
- Allocate funding and in-kind resources for anti-trafficking efforts, including implementation of the NAP.
- Develop and implement, in partnership with NGOs and foreign donors, a comprehensive and centralized database to accurately report the government's anti-

trafficking statistics.

- Train prosecutors to systematically request restitution for victims in trafficking cases.

PROSECUTION ✓

The government maintained anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. In August 2022, the government enacted a comprehensive anti-trafficking law, drafted with support from international organizations, Law 22015 “On Combating Trafficking in Persons in the Central African Republic,” which strengthened existing criminal provisions within the penal code, as well as included new provisions on victim protection and prevention efforts. Articles 5 and 6 of the anti-trafficking law criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of five to 10 years’ imprisonment for offenses involving adult victims and five to 10 years’ imprisonment with hard labor for those involving child victims. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, and commensurate with those prescribed for other serious crimes, such as kidnapping. Additionally, Article 7 of the law added increased penalties for trafficking crimes involving aggravated circumstances.

The government reported initiating 42 trafficking investigations and continuing two investigations from the previous reporting period. This compared with initiating eight investigations in the previous reporting period. The government did not report any prosecutions or convictions of suspected traffickers, compared with two prosecutions and one conviction in the previous reporting period. Severe resource constraints and a lack of trafficking expertise among law enforcement officials and judges continued to hinder law enforcement efforts.

The government did not report any prosecutions or convictions of government employees complicit in human trafficking crimes; however, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns. Some officials accepted bribes from traffickers to ignore trafficking crimes. Central African Armed Forces (FACA) unlawfully recruited and used child soldiers, including children who took a direct part in hostilities and children under the age of 15 in the reporting period. The government also coordinated with and provided support to the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group, a non-state armed group that recruited and used child soldiers. The government did not report any updates on investigations initiated during the previous reporting period involving a customs agent charged with crimes related to sex trafficking or individual FACA soldiers previously charged with violating command directives by forcibly recruiting at least one child and using seven children in support roles to serve at checkpoints and run errands.

The government expanded anti-trafficking training sessions for law enforcement, prosecutors, and front-line workers. The government distributed a circular note instructing law enforcement and courts to utilize the new trafficking law and provided training to officials in all 20 prefectures. The government organized a series of anti-trafficking training sessions for security forces and customs officers at three military installations. In partnership with an international organization, the government provided six multiday training sessions on prosecuting trafficking crimes for prosecutors. The government trained representatives of 14 armed groups on the new anti-trafficking law, child protection measures, and GBV. The government, in partnership with NGOs, organized nine training and awareness sessions for community leaders, law enforcement officials, business owners, and UN security forces. Most government officials continued to lack an understanding of human trafficking, hindering the government’s ability to investigate trafficking crimes and identify victims. Years of destabilizing conflict exacerbated by continued violence during the previous reporting periods and a lack of political will severely limited formal judicial capacity outside the capital, leading to the frequent use of customary dispute resolution methods through which traditional chiefs or community leaders administered punishment for criminal acts. Authorities continued to partner with UN Police mentors to assist in law enforcement operations, including trafficking crimes.

PROTECTION ✓

The government maintained victim protection efforts. The government reported it identified two trafficking victims, compared with identifying 19 trafficking victims in the previous reporting period. Observers noted most trafficking victims were individuals predominantly living in conflict or crisis zones and overwhelmingly members of indigenous and ethnic minority groups, such as the Ba'Aka, Aka, and Bofi community. The government provided services to two victims identified during the reporting period, compared with 19 victims in the previous reporting period. The government, in partnership with an international organization, revised its SOPs on victim identification and referral to services; the updated SOPs required law enforcement officers to screen for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations. In partnership with an international organization, the government provided training to UMIRR officers on the new SOPs to improve victim identification and referral to services.

UMIRR served as the lead government agency to provide services for trafficking victims. UMIRR, in partnership with NGOs and international organizations, offered shelter, basic necessities, and medical care. The government reported legal aid services were provided by donor-funded organizations. While foreign national victims and CAR citizens were entitled to the same services, UMIRR officials reported long-term assistance was not available to foreign national victims. The government reported releasing 20 children previously detained in Bangui for association with armed groups and reunited them with their families in December 2022. The government did not report if the previously reported five former child soldiers detained in Ngaragba prison were among the 33 children released from jail (two were detained in 2019, one in 2020, and two in July and August 2021). Following 2021 reports FACA and the Kremlin-backed Wagner group used children in combat and support roles, the government issued a command directive barring children from entry on military installations in April 2022.

The government reported adult victims participated in investigations and prosecutions against alleged traffickers; courts held closed door trials for cases involving children. The government reported it could provide shelter for victim-witnesses and police security if needed. Authorities did not report providing legal alternatives to the removal of foreign victims to countries where they may face hardship or retribution. The law allowed victims to file civil suits against traffickers or seek restitution in criminal cases; however, the government did not report any victims filing civil suits or courts awarding restitution from convicted traffickers during the reporting period.

PREVENTION ✓

The government maintained mixed efforts to prevent trafficking. The government's inter-ministerial National Committee for Trafficking in Persons (National Committee), led by a presidentially appointed adviser, continued to coordinate government anti-trafficking efforts and convened regularly. The government implemented parts of its 2022-2023 NAP. The government did not report dedicating a budget or adequate resources to anti-trafficking efforts. The government, in coordination with local NGOs, trained journalists, social workers, and parliamentarians on human trafficking. The government continued to carry out awareness-raising campaigns in collaboration with local NGOs and funded a weekly radio program on combating human trafficking. UMIRR continued to operate its hotline dedicated to GBV, which staffed French- and local-language speakers; however, the government did not report any trafficking-related calls received by the hotline. In partnership with international organizations, the government launched a hotline for violence against women, including trafficking, but did not report the number of trafficking-related calls.

In partnership with an international organization, the government provided reintegration services to child soldiers, prevented the unlawful detention of former child soldiers, and increased efforts to minimize their re-recruitment by armed groups. The government continued to collaborate with UNPOL on its annual awareness campaigns against sexual exploitation and abuse. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. The government reported it drafted a new mining code to align with international labor laws and improve standards for

workers, which remained pending at the end of the reporting period. The government reported providing trafficking training for its diplomatic personnel during the reporting period.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE: ✓

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in CAR, and traffickers exploit victims from CAR abroad. Observers report traffickers primarily exploit CAR nationals within the country and, in smaller numbers, in Cameroon, Mali, Chad, Nigeria, the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, and South Sudan. Poverty and conflict continue to increase the risk of all forms of exploitation in the country. Perpetrators – including transient merchants, herders, and non-state armed groups – exploit children in domestic servitude, sex trafficking, as well as in forced labor in agriculture, artisanal gold and diamond mines, shops, restaurants and bars, and street vending within CAR.

Also within the country, some relatives exploit children in domestic servitude, and community members exploit *Aka (pygmy)* minorities in domestic servitude, especially in the southwest of the country. Cameroonian trafficking networks in CAR exploit Malian, Cameroonian, and Congolese citizens in sex and labor trafficking. Authorities' prejudice against individuals in sex trafficking, despite its prevalence, hinders victims' access to assistance. NGOs report members of the Muslim community, who lost vital identification documents while fleeing intra-communal violence or internal conflict, face discrimination in obtaining new identification documents, increasing vulnerabilities to trafficking. In years past, some government workers reportedly coerced women into sex in exchange for government employment or documents and services to which they were entitled. Fraudulent labor recruiters attract foreigners from nearby countries, such as Chad and Libya, to enter the country undocumented to work in CAR's mining sector; armed groups capture and exploit some of these economic migrants in forced labor.

Traffickers reportedly take advantage of abject poverty across the country to recruit women and girls with the promise of money for their children or families. Some relatives or community members coerce girls into forced marriages and subsequently exploit the girls in domestic servitude or sex trafficking. Husbands may coerce their wives to engage in sex trafficking to cover household expenses with little recourse from authorities. Officials note some family members also exploit children in labor and sex trafficking to supplement family income.

Observers reported Central African criminal elements engage in the sex trafficking of girls as young as age 12 in *maisons de joie* (houses of joy) throughout Bangui. *Maisons de joie* are private residences with little official oversight where Central Africans serve alcohol and food to middle and upper class customers as a cover to exploit girls and women in sex trafficking. Officials reported private residences operate as brothels for girls as young as 12. Violent conflict since 2012 has resulted in chronic instability and the internal displacement of 632,240 people, increasing the vulnerability of adults and children to labor and sex trafficking. Observers noted individuals or communities living in conflict, crisis, or post-disaster settings; minorities; and undocumented migrants are at particular risk of sex trafficking and forced labor. The UN reported 3.14 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance and more than 516,000 people had been internally displaced as of January 2023.

Escalating pre- and post-election violence resulted in armed groups recruiting and using more child soldiers, with nearly 3,000 recruited into combat since the country's December 2020 elections. A coalition of six armed groups (*Mouvement Patriotique pour la Centrafrique*; Return, Reclamation, and Rehabilitation [3R]; *Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique* [UPC]; *Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de la Centrafrique* [FPRC]; *Anti-Balaka Mokom*; and *Anti-Balaka Ndomate*), intent on overthrowing the democratically elected government – the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) – continued to recruit child soldiers during the reporting period. In addition, individual militias associated with *Anti-Balaka*; *Ex-Seleka*; the FPRC; the Lord's Resistance Army; 3R; the UPC; and other armed groups continued to forcibly recruit and use child soldiers in CAR before and after the creation of the CPC.

Multiple sources alleged armed groups in southeastern CAR – areas outside governmental control – kidnapped children and coerced them into serving as child soldiers, in addition to forcing community members into forced labor as porters, cooks, and other support roles, or in illegal mining operations. International organizations reported armed groups recruited children to serve as combatants, servants, child brides, and sex slaves in 2020; armed groups also subjected children to forced labor in the mining sector. As in the previous reporting period, the government continued coordinating with and providing support to the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group, a non-state armed group that recruited and used child soldiers. In addition, FACA continued to unlawfully recruit and use child soldiers, including children who took a direct part in hostilities and children under the age of 15.

Since the conflict began in 2012, armed groups have recruited more than 17,000 children. Militias primarily recruited and used child soldiers from the prefectures of Vakaga, Haute-Kotto, Haut-Mbomou, Nana-Grebizi, Nana-Mambere, and Basse-Kotto; these areas were under intermittent government control during the reporting period. An international organization reported armed groups, particularly UPC forces, began forcibly recruiting Peuhl and Arab children in Nzako. Although some children may initially join locally organized community defense groups to protect their families from opposing militias, many commanders maintain influence over these children even after they are demobilized, increasing their risk of re-recruitment. Inadequately funded reintegration programming, continuing instability, and a lack of economic opportunity throughout the country exacerbate the risks of re-recruitment among former child soldiers. Some demobilized child soldiers face violent, and at times deadly, reprisals from their communities after reintegration.