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# 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Afghanistan

## AFGHANISTAN (Tier 3)

References to the Taliban in this report do not denote or imply that the United States recognizes the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan.

Afghan ministries and other public sector institutions do not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and are not making significant efforts to do so. Afghanistan remained on Tier 3. During the reporting period, there was a pattern of recruiting or employing child soldiers and a pattern of sexual slavery (*bacha bazi* – a practice in which men exploit boys for social and sexual entertainment). Despite this, the Taliban took some steps to address trafficking, including by issuing a formal decree to combat human trafficking, which included directing Afghan ministries and other public sector institutions to investigate trafficking crimes and conduct public awareness activities. However, Afghan ministries and other public sector institutions did not take meaningful steps to address trafficking. The Taliban did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions, nor did they identify or protect any trafficking victims. The Taliban continued to undermine the rights of women, members of minority groups, and other vulnerable populations, and it hindered the work of NGOs, further exacerbating vulnerabilities to trafficking and obstructing the protection of victims.

## PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Cease the unlawful recruitment or use of children by the Taliban, including at local levels; negotiate with other armed groups to also undertake such efforts; and aim to demobilize children from all armed groups with adequate protection and reintegration support.
- Enforce the ban on the use of children for sexual slavery (*bacha bazi*), including among the ranks of the Taliban.
- Increase efforts to identify trafficking victims, including by screening for trafficking indicators among vulnerable populations, including returning migrants, children involved in street begging, children associated with armed groups, and individuals in commercial sex, and refer them to NGOs and international organizations for protection services.
- Implement the December 2024 decree to combat human trafficking.
- Investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes, and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, including complicit officials.
- Ensure victims are not inappropriately penalized solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, including individuals in commercial sex.
- Increase cooperation with civil society organizations seeking to assist vulnerable populations, including male and female trafficking victims, including by re-opening victim shelters throughout the country.
- Enact and implement a comprehensive anti-trafficking law that criminalizes all forms of trafficking in persons.
- Formally convene an inter-ministerial anti-trafficking commission to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts.

## PROSECUTION

Afghan ministries and other public sector institutions did not take meaningful steps to enforce anti-trafficking laws. The Taliban made no anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts.

For the third consecutive year, the Taliban did not report whether they viewed any laws enacted under the pre-August 15, 2021 government related to trafficking as remaining in effect. According to observers, the Taliban have purported to revoke Afghanistan's constitution and criminal code, including all laws on the protection of children, and judicial processes are based on interpretations of religious jurisprudence. Enforcement of so-called "laws" adopted by the Taliban varies across the country, with local leaders frequently issuing their own edicts, because of the elimination of specialized institutions. Observers noted the Taliban prohibit lawyers from referencing the Afghanistan penal code enacted under the pre-August 15, 2021 government in court, leaving vulnerable populations without protection in the justice system.

For the third consecutive year, the Taliban did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of trafficking crimes. The police, under the Ministry of Interior, are responsible for investigating criminal offenses, including trafficking. The Ministry of Interior claimed the Taliban arrested 300 traffickers over the past three years without providing further details. The Taliban did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of Taliban members for alleged complicity in trafficking crimes. Observers reported challenges in the Taliban's ability to distinguish human trafficking from migrant smuggling and that lack of capacity hindered anti-trafficking efforts. Impunity was a significant problem among the Taliban, and there was no formal system of accountability. Although *bacha bazi* is officially banned, the practice has continued. Observers reported Taliban members were, in some cases, perpetrators of *bacha bazi*. The Taliban recruited and used child soldiers, some as young as 12 years old, in support roles. The Taliban denied recruiting or using child soldiers, claiming their code of conduct prohibited boys with no facial hair from being allowed onto the battlefield or military bases. Observers reported local Taliban members recruited children by falsifying ages on their identification cards.

## PROTECTION

Afghan ministries and other public sector institutions did not take meaningful steps to identify or provide services to trafficking victims. The Taliban did not report identifying any trafficking victims or providing services.

An NGO reported operating two shelters for child victims of crime and children who were homeless in Kabul, which could also assist child victims of trafficking. Another NGO reported operating three women's shelters in Kabul for survivors of domestic violence, including potential trafficking victims. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA) operated an orphanage for boys, which could assist victims of crime, including human trafficking. There were no reports of Taliban-run shelters for women or men who were victims of crime, including trafficking. Civil society representatives reported significant challenges maintaining or receiving approval to provide protection services, a lack of capacity, and limited funding continued to hinder efforts to combat trafficking. Observers reported the Taliban resisted discussing sex trafficking or allowing protection services for victims, particularly women and girls. Civil society actors, including those assisting crime victims, reported they operated in an environment of uncertainty, fear, harassment, and interference by the Taliban. The Taliban severely limited the work of NGOs by prohibiting Afghan women from working at NGOs outside the healthcare and education sectors and detaining female staff for not being accompanied by a *mahram* (male chaperone), affecting the availability of trafficking victim services. Authorities often placed child trafficking victims in detention centers alongside adults where children experienced unlawful prison labor or conditions with indicators of forced labor, torture, and sexual abuse. Observers reported police often arrested children begging in the streets without conducting any screenings for trafficking indicators.

The Taliban did not report having formal procedures for identifying and referring trafficking victims to protection services. However, observers reported there was an informal referral mechanism for local police to refer potential child victims to the MoLSA child protection

department, which, after reviewing the case, referred children to Taliban-run facilities or to NGOs for assistance. The Taliban acknowledged using *hudud* punishments (corporal punishments for perceived moral crimes), including for engaging in a sexual relationship outside marriage, which discourages sex trafficking victims from reporting exploitation as they are vulnerable to penalization solely for acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Observers noted the Taliban inappropriately penalized victims in cases of sex trafficking. Observers reported *bacha bazi* victims often did not report their exploitation out of fear of punishment from the Taliban and social stigma. The Taliban had a “commission for the purification of the ranks,” composed of senior Taliban members, to identify and demobilize children among its forces. The Taliban did not report identifying or demobilizing any child soldiers in 2024.

## PREVENTION

Afghan ministries and other public sector institutions did not take meaningful steps to prevent trafficking. However, the Taliban began to take limited steps to prevent trafficking.

In December 2024, the Taliban so-called emir issued a decree declaring trafficking in persons illegal under *Sharia* and directed relevant Afghan ministries to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts, investigate human trafficking crimes, sentence convicted traffickers to prison, and conduct public awareness activities. However, the Taliban did not report implementation of such measures and observers reported the decree conflated human trafficking with migrant smuggling, potentially hindering its overall effectiveness. The Taliban’s so-called “Deputy Minister of Interior” was responsible for anti-trafficking efforts, and MoLSA, in coordination with security agencies, was responsible for the enforcement of regulations related to forced child labor. The Ministry of Interior reported the Taliban developed a four-year strategy to combat human trafficking without providing further details. The Taliban did not report any activities to raise awareness of human trafficking, though provincial authorities in Nangarhar directed imams to discuss the dangers of human trafficking during Friday prayers. The Taliban did not implement measures to prevent children from unlawful recruitment or use in combat and in support roles. The Taliban did not provide information on labor inspections conducted during the reporting period, compared with inspecting 259 factories in 2023 and identifying 42 cases of child labor. The Taliban did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts.

## TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

Trafficking affects all communities. This section summarizes reporting on the nature and scope of trafficking over the past five years. Human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Afghanistan, and traffickers exploit victims from Afghanistan abroad. Internal trafficking is more prevalent than transnational trafficking. Traffickers exploit men, women, and children in bonded labor, a form of forced labor by which traffickers offer loans and manipulate the debts to coerce workers into continued employment, sometimes exploiting entire families in various industries, including brickmaking and carpet weaving. The economic crisis, extreme weather events, forced repatriations from neighboring countries, and food insecurity increase the risk of exploitation by traffickers, particularly in bonded labor, as some take out loans to cover expenses and pay increasing prices to migrant smugglers. Since the Taliban takeover on August 15, 2021, vulnerabilities to exploitation continue to intensify, damaging victim support networks, undermining the rights of women and girls, intensifying the refugee crisis, instilling fear in the population, and increasing internal displacement, including forced displacements. IDPs, Afghan returnees, undocumented migrants, those without national identification documents, and refugees are at a high risk of exploitation, as are those associated with the pre-August 2021 government and their families. Opium poppy cultivation plummeted because of the Taliban’s ban and remains low; according to international experts, while this ban may help combat the illicit trade of opium, it significantly increases the vulnerability of populations that have depended on this trade for their livelihoods. In previous years, NGOs confirmed reports of children being used to support opium

poppy cultivation and harvesting, as well as drug production and smuggling. Drought and extreme weather displace communities, increasing vulnerabilities to trafficking.

Most Afghan trafficking victims are children forced to work in carpet making, brick kilns, domestic servitude, sex trafficking (including *bacha bazi*), domestic work, herding livestock, agriculture, workshops, construction, mining, begging, low-skilled labor, poppy cultivation and harvesting, salt mining, petty crime, drug smuggling, weapons trafficking, truck driving, and in the transportation and hotel sectors. Civil society experts indicate boys are more vulnerable to trafficking than girls, especially in *bacha bazi*. Children, predominantly boys between the ages of 13 and 18, are forced by their families to migrate unaccompanied for work to other parts of Afghanistan or abroad to Türkiye, Iran, or Pakistan to support their families. Some families with large debt, including drug-related debt, “sell” their children to traffickers who require them to work as indentured servants or marry off underage daughters in exchange for a dowry payment; some families force their children into labor with physical violence or knowingly “sell” their children into sex trafficking, including *bacha bazi*. Some families reportedly force their children into street begging through coercion.

The Taliban and other armed groups unlawfully recruit and use child soldiers in combat and support roles. The Taliban recruit children through coercion and fraud, including false promises. Groups such as ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) and the National Resistance Front (NRF) use child soldiers in direct hostilities to plant and detonate improvised explosive devices, carry weapons, spy, and guard bases. The Taliban and groups such as ISIS-K forcibly use child soldiers and imprison children associated with other armed groups, including potential trafficking victims. The Taliban recruit children from schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan and enroll them in special schools (*jihadi madrassas*) that provide military training and religious indoctrination. The Taliban encourage relatives to send their children to join their ranks to expand their trusted personnel. Armed groups target children from impoverished and rural areas, placing displaced children at a higher risk of recruitment or use by armed groups. The Taliban maintain detention facilities in which they force detainees, including child and adult sex trafficking victims charged with “moral crimes,” into prison labor or conditions indicative of forced labor, inconsistent with international norms. Prior to August 15, 2021, Afghan security forces and non-state armed groups unlawfully recruited and used children in combat and support roles.

Traffickers exploit young boys in *bacha bazi*. Observers report cases of *bacha bazi* by the Taliban and nearly all armed groups. *Bacha bazi* survivors previously reported to NGOs that *bacha bazi* is committed by the powerful, including community leaders, and, in previous years, military commanders, police, and government officials of the pre-August 15, 2021, government.

Restrictions on the movement of and exercise of rights by women and girls, and severely diminished access to employment and education, significantly increase their vulnerabilities to trafficking and drastically increase their risk of child and forced marriage. Woman-headed households and widows are at an increased risk of poverty and vulnerability to trafficking. Freedom of movement for women is largely restricted unless accompanied by a *mahram*. Even prior to August 15, 2021, nine out of 10 women in Afghanistan experienced at least one form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime; many of these women have been forced to return to their families after the Taliban closed women’s shelters throughout the country, and domestic violence continues to increase. Observers report women are prevented from fleeing abusive situations by punishments imposed by the Taliban for “moral crimes,” increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. The Taliban’s enforcement of their hijab decree, which calls on adult Afghan women to comply with Taliban standards of the hijab and prescribes “punishment,” primarily directed at a woman’s male guardian, for noncompliance, exacerbates already strict limitations on the exercise of freedom of movement; reports indicate the Taliban targets women and girls of certain ethnic minority groups. Some women are reportedly apprehended because of false accusations of violating the decree and are subsequently disappeared. According to experts, some individuals are vulnerable to exploitation, threats, and violence in Afghanistan because they lack access to social services, are coerced on account of their sexual orientation or identity or seek informal methods to escape Afghanistan.

Members of ethnic and religious minority groups, such as Hazara Shia, Ahmadi Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Bahais, and Christians, are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation because of threats and other dangers they face from the Taliban and other groups, such as ISIS-K. Ethnic and religious minorities are forced to hide in fear or to seek ways to leave the country, putting them at increased risk of exploitation. Muslim Shia populations are targeted by the Taliban and ISIS-K and are at increased risk of trafficking because of displacement and attacks.

Afghan men, women, and children pay intermediaries to assist them in finding employment abroad, primarily in Iran, Pakistan, and Europe; some intermediaries and employers force Afghans into labor or sex trafficking. Afghans continue to seek refuge in neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran, many through illegal means. International organizations report hundreds of thousands of Afghans, including tens of thousands of registered refugees, were deported to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran; many of these returnees are vulnerable to trafficking due to economic instability or other conditions. Some Afghan women and girls who are sold in Afghanistan, India, Iran, and Pakistan are exploited in sex trafficking and domestic servitude by their new husbands. According to an international organization, the dire economic and security situation, political instability, and other factors such as drought in several provinces exacerbate the problem of families “selling” girls into marriages, including in cases involving Taliban members. Some women and girls are forced into marriage to escape Afghanistan. Afghan boys and men are subjected to forced labor and debt bondage in agriculture and construction, primarily in Iran, Pakistan, Greece, Türkiye, and the Gulf states. Observers reported since August 15, 2021, some Afghan refugees in Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Türkiye, Europe, and Central Asia are afraid to report exploitation for fear of deportation back to Afghanistan. Traffickers in Iran, including Iranian criminal groups, exploit Afghan children in forced labor as beggars and street vendors and in forced criminality, including drug trafficking and the smuggling of fuel and tobacco. Iranian police sometimes detain, torture, and extort Afghan child trafficking victims before deportation. The Iranian government and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps compel Afghan migrants, including children as young as 12 years old, to fight in Iran-aligned militia groups deployed to Syria, including through force and by threatening them with arrest and deportation to Afghanistan. Former Afghan soldiers, hiding from the Taliban in Afghanistan or fleeing to other countries, such as Iran, are at risk of recruitment to fight in the Russia-Ukraine war because of financial instability and threats to their security. Migrant smuggling networks transport Afghan nationals living in Iran to Europe and subject them to sex trafficking and forced labor in restaurants to pay off debts incurred by smuggling fees. Some Afghan traffickers have subjected Afghan boys to *bacha bazi* in Germany, Hungary, North Macedonia, and Serbia.