

2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Venezuela

VENEZUELA (Tier 3)

Venezuela does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so. Venezuela remained on Tier 3. The United States does not recognize Nicolás Maduro and his representatives as the government of Venezuela. U.S. policy supports the 2015 National Assembly and the Venezuelan people in their struggle for a stable, democratic, and prosperous Venezuela. On January 10, 2019, the term of former president Nicolás Maduro ended. In July 2024, the Maduro-controlled National Electoral Council proclaimed Maduro the winner of that month's presidential election, despite publicly available evidence indicating Maduro lost by millions of votes. Maduro illegitimately swore in for a new presidential term in January 2025. The 2015 National Assembly remains the only national democratically elected institution in Venezuela. On January 5, 2025, the 2015 National Assembly renewed the mandate of its elected leadership. Maduro refused to cede control, preventing the 2015 National Assembly from exercising authority within the country. References herein reflect efforts made, or lack thereof, by Maduro and his representatives and not the democratically elected officials unable to exercise their authority within the country. Mentions of "Maduro and his representatives" or "Maduro representatives" below are not intended to indicate that the United States considers such entities to be the government of Venezuela. Despite a lack of significant efforts, Maduro and his representatives took some steps to address trafficking, including arresting suspected traffickers and removing potential victims from trafficking situations. However, a lack of reliable public information and restrictions on the press limit reporting on anti-trafficking efforts. Complicity, including in trafficking crimes, continued to be a serious problem. Complicit representatives overlooked and participated in sex trafficking crimes with impunity. Maduro and his representatives were complicit in trafficking crimes as they maintained a permissive environment for non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and other illegal armed groups, including foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) that forcibly recruited and used children as child soldiers or in forced criminality, and exploited them in sex trafficking and forced labor, while operating with impunity.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Vigorously investigate, prosecute, and convict traffickers, including complicit individuals and those involved in child sex trafficking, the recruitment or use of children by NSAGs, FTOs, or other illegal armed groups, and trafficking of persons who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
- Develop and implement formal procedures and training, including for immigration and law enforcement personnel at border crossings, to identify victims among vulnerable populations, such as individuals in commercial sex and children associated with armed groups, and refer victims for care.
- Proactively inform Venezuelans fleeing the country about the risks of human trafficking and where and how to seek services.
- Partner with civil society organizations and other service providers to increase protection and assistance for all victims, including repatriated victims, men, boys, and individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, as well as former soldiers.
- Draft and enact comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation criminalizing all forms of trafficking, including child sex trafficking without elements of force, fraud, or coercion and the trafficking of men and boys.
- To prevent forced labor among Cuban workers in Venezuela, hire any Cuban workers directly and utilize hiring practices that are in line with domestic and international law, and provide adequate protection to Cuban victims of human trafficking.

- Finalize, fund, and implement a NAP to address trafficking and present challenges, including mass migration and displacement, complicity, and the recruitment or use of children for armed conflict.
- Enhance interagency cooperation by forming a permanent anti-trafficking working group.
- Improve data collection of anti-trafficking efforts and make this data publicly available.

PROSECUTION

Maduro and his representatives maintained inadequate law enforcement efforts.

Venezuelan law did not criminalize all forms of trafficking. The law criminalized labor trafficking and some forms of sex trafficking of women and girls through a 2007 law on women's rights that prescribed penalties of 15 to 20 years' imprisonment. Inconsistent with international law, it required a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion to constitute child sex trafficking and therefore did not criminalize all forms of trafficking. Venezuelan law failed to criminalize the trafficking of men and boys when perpetrators were not part of an organized criminal organization. The law addressing organized crime criminalized trafficking by organized criminal groups of three or more individuals with penalties of 20 to 30 years' imprisonment. The penalties for trafficking crimes by organized criminal groups were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape.

Maduro and his representatives did not report investigating, prosecuting, or convicting any traffickers. Media reports indicated Maduro representatives conducted operations targeting 16 criminal gangs linked to human trafficking, arrested 42 suspected traffickers, and removed 55 potential victims from trafficking situations. Media reports also indicated Maduro's law enforcement officials dismantled two sex trafficking rings, one involved in transporting girls to the United States crossing the Darien and the other to Trinidad and Tobago. These operations combined led to the identification of four child victims and the arrest of 10 alleged traffickers, one of whom was a child. This compared with the previous reporting period wherein two suspects were charged with trafficking crimes, including a complicit official, and in another case, three traffickers were prosecuted, convicted, and sentenced to at least 22 years' imprisonment. The Scientific, Penal, and Criminal Investigations Corps (CICPC) was the specialized law enforcement unit charged with the investigation of trafficking crimes. The organized crime office (ONCDOFT) was the lead entity charged with the prosecution of trafficking crimes against women and girls; however, because the law did not recognize trafficking as a crime against men or boys, its efforts did not include prosecuting crimes against male victims or persons who identified as gay which led to impunity for traffickers and left victims unprotected and at risk of re-victimization. ONCDOFT did not report what activities it carried out during the reporting period. Maduro and his representatives occasionally announced investigations into alleged trafficking crimes, but these investigations usually remained pending indefinitely or did not result in convictions or sentences for suspected traffickers. Prosecutors at times utilized a "gender-based violence" provision to charge suspected traffickers if they lacked sufficient information on alleged trafficking crimes. NGOs often reported information to officials to build cases or investigations, since officials did not have a formal or standard procedure for victim identification. Survivors of trafficking reported having to travel long distances to reach the courts for legal proceedings in their cases and having to wait long periods of time for judges to adjudicate their cases. Survivors indicated the judicial process moved slowly, and technical and privacy issues were pervasive.

The 95th National Prosecutor's Office Specializing in the Crime of Trafficking of Women and Girls hears trafficking cases, but aside from this, there are no other units, courts, or offices dedicated to investigating, prosecuting, or hearing trafficking cases. Observers reported courts lacked resources, personnel, and equipment, which limited their ability to prosecute and follow cases outside of Caracas. The 47th National Prosecutor's Office Specializing in Matters of Femicide and the 64th and 82nd National Prosecutor's Offices handled cases of lascivious acts with an especially vulnerable victim, sexual slavery, sex trafficking, sexual violence, and human trafficking. Observers

noted many cases remained open and did not progress due to budgetary and personnel constraints. Sources also reported many trafficking cases were processed in courts specializing in violence against women and girls due to lack of information and resources. Maduro representatives did not report using or training officials on an investigative guide for trafficking crimes or if the guide specifically included trafficking indicators, as developed in the previous reporting period by the Attorney General's Office (AGO) in coordination with an international organization. Civil society reported the manual was poorly implemented and had minimal anti-trafficking impacts. In the previous reporting period, an international committee noted concern with the lack of measures to prosecute and punish cases of human trafficking. Maduro and his representatives did not report cooperating with foreign governments to investigate trafficking crimes, despite the identification of Venezuelan trafficking victims in numerous countries over the last five years.

Years of corruption, incompetence, and abuse weakened institutional capacity and fostered a permissive environment for NSAGs and other illegal armed groups, such as transnational criminal organizations, powerful mining gangs, and criminal groups operating in illegal mining areas and exploiting women and girls in sex trafficking. According to stakeholders, high-level individuals linked to Maduro and his representatives were complicit in trafficking crimes themselves or provided support and a permissive environment to those perpetrating these crimes. NGOs indicated Maduro and his representatives continuously overlooked the recruitment and use of child soldiers by illegal armed groups, including the U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) National Liberation Army (ELN), Segunda Marquetalia, and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP). Near land and maritime border crossings, survivors reported Maduro representatives and coast guard personnel facilitated and sometimes actively participated in trafficking crimes. As in previous reporting periods, concern for official complicity in sex trafficking crimes continued. According to sources, the pervasive environment of impunity likely emboldened complicit individuals to engage in human trafficking crimes, and the absence of a free press prevented adequate reporting. State and local media ignored documented cases of official complicity in human trafficking crimes. NGOs continued to report alliances between NSAGs and certain state security officers. According to an international organization, members of the national guard working in mining zones contributed to the demand for commercial sex in communities that lacked oversight because of an absence of regulatory mechanisms and may have exacerbated trafficking crimes as those involved may have been trafficking victims. Observers reported officials in Bolivar state benefited financially from labor trafficking in gold mines. Family members of individuals who disappeared at sea and civil society organizations alleged Maduro and his representatives were unwilling to investigate a trafficking network between Venezuela and Caribbean countries because Maduro-linked individuals were complicit in the perpetration of trafficking crimes. Media sources reported complicit Maduro representatives charged \$300 to \$400 to allow the departure of boats transporting trafficking victims to nearby Caribbean islands. Sources reported a high-level official in Delta Amacuro state accepted bribes from groups smuggling individuals from Venezuela into Trinidad and Tobago. Maduro representatives did not make notable efforts to investigate complicity, particularly the long-standing allegation that national guard and coast guard members active in coastal states, such as Sucre and Falcon, facilitated the transport of trafficking victims to Aruba, Curaçao, and Trinidad and Tobago. Maduro and his representatives did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of public representatives complicit in trafficking crimes. This compared with media reports in the previous reporting period noting the arrest of a military officer charged with trafficking crimes after attempting to send three girls and a woman to Peru for sex trafficking.

PROTECTION

Maduro and his representatives maintained minimal protection efforts and did not report identifying or referring victims to services.

Maduro representatives did not report identifying any victims; this compared with their identification of one adult female victim in the previous reporting period, according to media reports. NGOs were often the first point of contact for victims, as there continued to be no formal or

standard procedure for victim identification or referral. For the second consecutive year, Maduro representatives did not report adopting measures from, or training or funding for effective implementation of, a guide on trafficking victim protection in emergency shelters developed in the previous reporting period. A university analysis of media reports indicated that between January and November 2024, there was a total of 60 cases of suspected trafficking crimes involving 211 victims, of whom 94 percent were exploited in sex trafficking and six percent were exploited in labor trafficking. This compared with approximately 267 Venezuelan women and girls identified in operations against trafficking networks inside and outside the country in the previous reporting period as reported by NGOs. Additionally, observers identified Venezuelan children in child labor in Ecuador and Venezuela, which may have included potential trafficking crimes. Media reported four Venezuelan sex trafficking victims in Mexico, 10 Venezuelan labor trafficking victims in Costa Rica, six Venezuelan labor trafficking victims in Peru, and an unknown number of Venezuelan trafficking victims in Spain. Media also reported 40 Venezuelan girls identified as sex trafficking victims of U.S.-designated FTO Tren de Aragua (TdA) in Peru.

Availability of victim services remained limited, with no specialized shelters for trafficking victims in the country. Maduro and his representatives did not have specialized services; and reportedly provided services based on a victim's degree of vulnerability and social risk; the type of crime involved; the victim's relationship with the aggressor; and the victim's individual psychological, social, and economic profile. Maduro representatives did not report what assistance, if any, they provided Venezuelan victims upon their return to Venezuela or if they coordinated with foreign governments to ensure the protection of those victims. NGOs and international organizations facilitated some limited training and workshops on trafficking, but they did not report what support, if any, these organizations received from Maduro and his representatives. Maduro representatives did not report efforts to utilize the Global Protection Cluster launched by UNHCR in the previous reporting period to convene several UN agencies, international NGOs, and domestic civil society partners to establish a protection response to the humanitarian crisis in the country, including addressing trafficking victims' protection needs. Venezuelan anti-trafficking efforts focused primarily on women and girls as potential victims of human trafficking crimes to the exclusion of boys and men; and discriminated against persons who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, leaving them more vulnerable and unprotected. An NGO reported some victims had trouble accessing services, and in some cases, were turned away from shelters on the basis of their sexual orientation or identity. According to NGOs, efforts by Maduro and his representatives to restrict foreign funding to civil society actors limited NGOs ability to offer services to trafficking victims.

PREVENTION

Maduro and his representatives maintained inadequate prevention efforts.

No permanent anti-trafficking interagency body existed, and Maduro representatives did not report efforts to implement, fund, or publish the 2021-2025 NAP, approved by decree in 2021. Maduro representatives did not report on the content of the plan, including whether it addressed present challenges, such as forced labor in domestic service, the recruitment or use of children for armed conflict, the pervasive recruitment and use of children by illegal armed groups in forced criminality, the increase in victim repatriations from other countries, or efforts necessary to mitigate the exploitation of those leaving the country as a result of the economic crisis. Maduro and his representatives did not make efforts to inform Venezuelans fleeing the country about the risks of human trafficking despite notable risks of exploitation and trafficking crimes faced by this population. NGOs reported carrying out awareness-raising activities and events with minimal support from Maduro representatives. Maduro representatives did not operate or fund any trafficking-specific hotlines. There was a 24-hour hotline to report cases of abuse against women, including trafficking; however, it was not consistently operational, and Maduro representatives did not report if it was operated by Maduro representatives or a humanitarian organization. Maduro representatives are not known to provide anti-trafficking training for their diplomatic personnel and did not report any efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts.

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 domestic and foreign victims in Venezuela, and traffickers exploit Venezuelan victims abroad. As Venezuela's economic, political, and humanitarian crises continued, nearly eight million Venezuelans have fled the country since 2015, and more than six million have settled in at least 18 countries in the region. Traffickers allegedly recruit Venezuelan migrants and refugees into trafficking networks, particularly women and girls, using false promises of safe migration. Venezuelan trafficking victims have been identified in at least 31 countries over the last five years. Traffickers exploit Venezuelan nationals in Aruba, The Bahamas, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Curaçao, Denmark, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Finland, Germany, Guyana, Haiti, Iceland, Macau, Mexico, the Netherlands, Panama, Peru, Spain, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, Trinidad and Tobago, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Uruguay. Traffickers lure victims online using fraudulent employment opportunities. Venezuelan women and girls are particularly at risk of sex trafficking in neighboring countries. Venezuelan women and girls are exploited in sex trafficking in Peru's mining encampments and businesses serving miners. The government of the Netherlands reports an increase of Latin American individuals described by the government as transgender in commercial sex across Europe. Traffickers subject Venezuelan victims to sex trafficking in hotels, holiday parks, and in private residences in the Netherlands and frequently moved victims to avoid detection. Advocates report traffickers lure women, including women they described as transgender, to Spain and Germany with fraudulent employment opportunities and subjected them to forced surgical procedures before exploiting them in commercial sex. Traffickers increasingly exploit women from central Venezuela and non-border regions of Venezuela. Traffickers increasingly exploit children using online platforms, including live streaming sex acts. Traffickers increasingly exploit Venezuelan men in forced labor in other countries, including Aruba and Curaçao.

NSAGs, including Colombian illegal armed groups, especially near border regions, subject Venezuelans – mainly migrants and refugees – to forced criminality, and recruit and use child soldiers. The UN, foreign governments, media outlets, and credible NGOs reported Maduro representatives – including security forces and local representatives, especially those near border regions – colluded with, tolerated, profited from, and allowed Colombian illegal armed groups to operate in Venezuelan territory with impunity, while also opposing groups at other times. Members of the Army, National Guard, and militias present along the Colombia-Venezuela border avoided engaging unspecified Maduro-allied groups in Venezuelan territory and encouraged the armed forces to aid and support their operations. Maduro and his representatives reportedly provided support and a permissive environment to NSAGs that recruited and used child soldiers and exploited children in forced criminality. Conflict among competing Colombian illegal armed groups for territorial control near the Venezuela-Colombia border led to the forced displacement of vulnerable Indigenous communities. Many fled in fear that their children might be recruited by armed groups after receiving threats their children would be abducted. FTOs such as the ELN and dissidents of the FARC recruit and use child soldiers. NGOs reported internal displacement of children seeking to avoid being forcibly recruited by these FTOs. Reports have documented the presence of dissident movements comprising FARC-EP, a dissident group of the demobilized FARC, and combatants in several Venezuelan states, including Amazonas, Apure, Bolívar, Guárico, Mérida, Táchira, and Zulia, five of which are border states. A civil society activist remained imprisoned under politically motivated pretexts after his organization documented and denounced Maduro representatives' complicity and support for NSAGs, including those that recruited or used children for conflict, among other crimes. According to NGOs, forced labor is a common punishment for violating rules imposed by armed groups. Illegal armed groups forced Venezuelans, including children, to work in mining areas and women and girls into sex trafficking. NSAGs exploit Venezuelan victims in Colombia, particularly in the border city of Cucuta and La Guajira department, in sex trafficking and forced labor, including forced begging and coca leaf harvesting.

Maduro representatives and international organizations have reported identifying sex and labor trafficking victims from South American, Caribbean, Asian, and African countries in Venezuela.

Foreign nationals living in Venezuela subject Ecuadorians, Filipinos, and other foreign nationals to domestic servitude. With the support of complicit regime military representatives, criminal armed groups controlled mining areas and established prominent and illegal gold mining operations in some of the country's most remote areas, including the Orinoco Mining Arc (OMA) in Bolívar state, where traffickers exploit women and girls in sex trafficking, forcibly recruit youth to join armed criminal groups, and force children to work in the mines under dangerous conditions. Criminal armed groups controlled most of the OMA territory and ran gold mining operations in strategic partnerships with Maduro representatives, who allowed the privatization of their ventures and legitimized their activities, while these groups subjected workers to threats, exploitation, wage confiscation, and forced labor. Approximately 45 percent of miners in Bolívar state were children and highly vulnerable to trafficking. Armed groups exploit civilians and kidnapping victims in sex trafficking and forced labor, including in farming, domestic service, and construction. Workers recruited from other areas of the country were victims of forced labor and manipulated through debt, threats of violence, and even death. Indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and forced labor in Bolívar and Amazonas states due to the presence and actions of NSAGs. In 2021, an NGO reported that mining gangs and NSAGs operating near Delta Amacuro in Bolívar state led members of the Indigenous Warao community into Guyana to work long shifts in illegal mines with no medical care and under precarious conditions. Traffickers recruited Warao women to work as cooks in the mines and later subjected them to sex trafficking in Guyana. In Warao communities, child marriage and adoptions into Creole communities are used as a means of relieving financial distress. Traffickers lured Warao children with basic necessities such as food or work to then exploit them in trafficking. The presence of illegal miners (*garimpeiros*) and the presence of Brazilian and Colombian criminal groups linked to illicit economies contribute to growing violence in the states of Amazonas, Bolívar, and Delta Amacuro. This situation led to a significant increase in forced displacement of Yanomami people, who are often exploited in sex and labor trafficking, especially older persons, women, and children.

TdA maintains its operations in the region, exploiting Venezuelan women and girls in at least five countries. These traffickers use beauty contests and marketing agencies to fraudulently lure women and girls and later exploit them in other countries or sell them to other criminal organizations. Alleged members of TdA exploited Venezuelan women and girls referred to as *multadas* in sex trafficking in the United States, subjecting them to debt bondage, threats and realized violence against them and their families. Alleged members of TdA exploited victims in sex trafficking in at least three U.S. states, with cities such as New York City and Nashville being destinations for victims.

The Cuban regime exploited Cuban regime-affiliated workers in Venezuela in forced labor. According to an NGO, there were 14,000 Cuban regime-affiliated medical professionals in the country, who were forced to work by the Cuban regime with support from Maduro and his representatives. According to a report, Cuban regime-affiliated workers in Venezuela did not receive decent living wages and had to rely on the generosity of their patients or money from their families back in Cuba. Survivors of trafficking who were in Venezuela reported having minders to ensure they were home after 6:00 pm and being subjected to peer-to-peer surveillance as a primary form of control. According to survivors of trafficking, they were placed in homes with more than 20 workers, two per room, and if one did something wrong, both would be punished. This created an incentive for workers to turn on each other. Trafficking survivors from this program in Venezuela reported being coerced into committing criminal acts by falsifying medical records and disposing of medicine to corroborate the fraudulent records they had to produce; they faced extensive and grave reprisals from Cuban authorities if they refused to follow such orders. Cuban regime-affiliated workers are often required to first serve in Venezuela before being allowed to serve in more appealing locations with better salaries. In 2022, 17 Cuban regime-affiliated victims stationed in Venezuela attempted to go to Colombia after escaping a medical mission but were arrested by Maduro representatives and turned over to Cuban regime authorities. These victims likely faced eight years of imprisonment upon arrival in Cuba. Cuban regime authorities ordered minders to take the passports of remaining Cuban regime-affiliated medical workers in Venezuela to prevent them from fleeing.