

Central African Republic - United States Department of State

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; therefore CAR was upgraded to Tier 2. Officials investigated and prosecuted suspected traffickers, and the country's criminal court prosecuted and convicted 33 armed group leaders for crimes including recruiting child soldiers. Additionally, the government coordinated with partners to demobilize and provide reintegration services for 1,150 children recruited by armed groups; identified two potential victims of trafficking during the course of a law enforcement investigation; launched an inter-ministerial committee which met regularly; and adopted a 2020-2021 national action plan. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. Victim services remained inadequate, and the government did not develop victim identification and referral procedures. The government has not convicted a trafficker since 2017, and official complicity remained a serious concern, including allegations government security forces may have used minors at two checkpoints.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Coordinate with international organizations to demobilize and provide reintegration services to child soldiers and increase efforts to minimize their re-recruitment by armed groups. • Expand efforts to hold armed groups recruiting and using children criminally accountable. • Develop victim identification and referral procedures in coordination with international organizations and NGOs to guide frontline officials' protection activities and increase efforts to identify trafficking victims within Bangui, including in the informal sector. • Proactively investigate and prosecute individuals sexually exploiting children and adults in *maisons de joie* (houses of joy) within Bangui under Penal Code Article 151. • Dedicate human resources and coordinate with civil society, NGOs, and international organizations to implement the 2020-2021 national action plan. • Provide anti-trafficking training for all officials in the Mixed Unit for Rapid Intervention and Repression of Sexual Violence to Women and Children (UMIRR) so it can effectively investigate trafficking cases, identify victims, and refer them to care. • Increase the number of court hearings—separate from informal mediation—for suspected trafficking cases, and expand efforts to investigate, prosecute, and convict traffickers through independent and fair trials. • Take concrete steps, in partnership with NGOs and international organizations, to provide services to victims of all forms of trafficking, and ensure trafficking victims are not punished for unlawful acts traffickers compel them to commit. • Use radio programming in French and Sangho to expand the awareness raising campaign in Bangui, in partnership with civil society, traditional leaders, and international organizations, to increase the public's ability to identify and refer trafficking crimes to law enforcement officers.

PROSECUTION

The government increased overall anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts during the reporting period. Article 151 of the penal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of five to 10 years' imprisonment, which were sufficiently stringent and with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other serious offenses, such as kidnapping. If the offense involved a child victim of sex trafficking or forced labor similar to slavery, the prescribed penalties increased to five to 10 years' imprisonment with hard labor.

Due to insecurity across the majority of the country's territory, the government faced challenges in collecting law enforcement statistics. Authorities investigated two suspected trafficking cases under Article 151 and one case involving potential exploitation of two children UMIRR officers identified. Officials initiated an investigation involving a woman recruiting minors into commercial sex but had not referred the case for prosecution at the end of the reporting period. In the previous reporting period, the government investigated one trafficking case under Article 151; however, authorities ultimately bypassed formal courts and resolved the case through mediation. Contrary to previous reports, the government last convicted a trafficker in 2017, sentencing the perpetrator to 10 years' imprisonment. The country's criminal court partnered with an international organization in February 2020 to prosecute, convict, and sentence 33 militants and armed group leaders to verdicts from 10 to 15 years' imprisonment (28 militants) to life in prison (five armed group leaders) for crimes against humanity, which included recruiting and using child soldiers.

The Minister of Justice issued a judicial directive in February 2020 to the country's judges encouraging them to apply Article 151 to suspected trafficking cases and to review existing cases for trafficking indicators. However, years of destabilizing conflict have 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 administer punishment for criminal acts. The government did not report investigating, prosecuting, or convicting government officials complicit in human trafficking offenses; however, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes by border agents and police remained concerns and may have inhibited law enforcement action during the year. During the reporting period, the government contributed in-kind donations to an international organization-implemented training for 60 police, gendarmerie, UMIRR, and community leaders to promote more effective trafficking investigations. The government did not provide or support training for front-line officials during the previous reporting period.

PROTECTION

The government increased efforts to identify victims, although available services remained inadequate. UMIRR officers reported identifying two potential victims through the course of a law enforcement investigation, compared with reporting zero victim identifications in the previous reporting period. The government had not developed victim identification standard operating procedures (SOPs); observers stated this lack of SOPs impeded the ability of front-line officials to identify victims of trafficking. In previous years, reports indicated the government arrested and jailed individuals engaged in commercial sex—some of whom may have been

trafficking victims—without verifying their ages or attempting to identify indicators of trafficking; while there were no reports of such penalization this year, officials' lack of training on victim identification increased the likelihood this practice continued. CAR's National Assembly formally adopted the Child Protection Code in February 2020, legislation criminalizing the recruitment of children into armed groups and increasing legal protections for former child soldiers.

During the reporting period, the government partnered with an international organization to demobilize 1,150 children associated with armed groups and provided them shelter, psycho-social services, and reintegration assistance, compared with demobilizing 913 child soldiers in 2018. In March 2020, the Minister for the Promotion of Women, Family, and the Protection of Children officially opened the *Maison de l'Espoir* (House of Hope) shelter in Bangui with the support of an international organization for victims of gender-based violence and trafficking; although the shelter had capacity for 15 victims, officials did not report referring victims during the rating period.

Observers alleged the government arrested and detained for several days in 2019 two minors whom armed groups previously had recruited. Authorities later released the two former child soldiers and referred them to a host family to assist with social reintegration. 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 the government or their alleged traffickers for restitution; however, there was no information this occurred during the reporting period.

PREVENTION

The government substantially increased prevention efforts, although ongoing conflict throughout the country hindered its overall ability to synchronize anti-trafficking initiatives. To address longstanding coordination deficiencies, the president designated the Minister for the Promotion of Women, Family, and the Protection of Children to lead the government's anti-trafficking efforts. The minister launched an inter-ministerial committee in September 2019, which met five times during the reporting period and formally validated a 2020-2021 national action plan in March 2020. The president signed the action plan into law in March 2020, and the government dedicated in-kind resources to implement aspects of the plan during the reporting period. Also in March, the government finalized a presidential decree creating a Coordination Bureau for Combatting Trafficking in Persons (CBCTIP) under the Office of the Presidency; the government designated ministerial focal points to implement the CBCTIP's mandate.

The Minister for the Promotion of Women, Family, and the Protection of Children coordinated with international organizations in February 2020 to hold a workshop for government and military officials on the importance of preventing the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Throughout 2019, the government contributed funding and partnered with an NGO to launch multiple sensitization campaigns in Bangui and Bangassou to increase the public's awareness of trafficking in persons; these campaigns included direct person-to-person contact, radio, and public signage. Also during the reporting period, officials—in coordination with an international organization—held sensitization programs in 13 communities throughout the country to draw attention to potential victims of trafficking, including child soldiers, and direct victims to available resources, including psycho-

social services. The awareness campaigns incorporated civil society actors, NGOs, as well as international organizations. The sensitization programs targeted the general public, individuals in exploitative conditions, first responders, and trusted authorities such as traditional chiefs and religious leaders; awareness programs used direct person-to-person outreach activities as well as training sessions.

UMIRR continued to operate its 24-hour hotline dedicated to gender-based violence staffed by French and local language speakers; however, the government did not provide statistics on the number of trafficking-related calls it received. Officials did not report taking any measures to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts or providing anti-trafficking training for its diplomatic personnel. Ministry of Labor officials conducted inspections in Bangui during the reporting period; however, instability and armed conflict throughout the country limited the government's ability to observe areas outside the capital, and inspectors did not monitor the informal sector where experts reported child trafficking and hazardous work conditions commonly occurred.

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. Most government officials, as well as civil society, lack an understanding of trafficking in persons, hindering the country's ability to identify victims and address the crime. Observers report traffickers primarily exploit CAR nationals within the country and transport a smaller number of victims between CAR and Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria, Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, or South Sudan. Traffickers—including transient merchants, herders, and armed groups—exploit children in domestic servitude and commercial sexual exploitation, as well as in forced labor in agriculture, artisanal gold and diamond mines, shops, and street vending within CAR. Also within the country, some relatives exploit children in forced labor in domestic work, and community members exploit *aka* (pygmy) minorities in domestic servitude, especially in the southwest of the country. Some relatives or community members coerce girls into forced marriages and subsequently exploit the girls in forced labor in domestic servitude or sex trafficking. Some authorities' prejudice against individuals in commercial sex—despite its prevalence—hinders victims' access to justice and assistance.

Observers reported Central African criminal elements sexually exploit girls as young as 13 in *maisons de joie* (houses of joy) throughout Bangui. *Maisons de joie* are private residences with little official oversight where CAR nationals serve alcohol and food to middle and upper class customers as a cover to exploit girls and women in commercial sex. Criminals reportedly take advantage of abject poverty across the country to recruit these girls with the promise of money for their children or families.

Violent conflict since 2012 has resulted in chronic instability and the displacement of more than one million people, increasing the vulnerability of men, women, and children to forced labor and sex trafficking. As of September 2019, approximately 600,000 people remained internally displaced and vulnerable to trafficking inside the country, 592,000 individuals sought refuge in neighboring countries, and roughly 7,000 refugees from neighboring countries remained within CAR.

Militias associated with Anti-Balaka; Ex-Seleka; Lords Resistance Army; Return,

Reclamation, and Rehabilitation (3R); and other armed groups continued to forcibly recruit and use child soldiers in CAR. Additionally, observers reported government security forces may have used minors at two checkpoints. International organizations reported armed groups recruited children to serve as combatants, servants, child brides, and sex slaves in 2019; armed groups also subjected children to forced labor in the mining sector. Since the conflict began in 2012, armed groups have recruited more than 14,000 children; during the reporting period, militias primarily recruited and used child soldiers from the prefectures of Basse-Kotto, Haute-Kotto, Mbomou, Nana-Grebizi, Nana-Mambere, and Ouaka. Experts noted armed groups were still using approximately 12,000 children in combat and support roles throughout the country at the end of the reporting period. Although some children 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.

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic has 14,584 civilian and military staff in CAR to protect civilians, provide security, support humanitarian operations, and promote and protect human rights, among other objectives. The UN reported there were 36 pending investigations and three substantiated cases of sexual abuse in 2019.