

Belize - United States Department of State

BELIZE: Tier 2 Watch List

The Government of Belize does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts included initiating more trafficking investigations, convicting a trafficker, and screening for potential trafficking victims during joint labor inspections. However, the government did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts from the previous reporting period. The government did not initiate any new prosecutions against traffickers and continued to apply victim identification procedures inconsistently, despite improvement in this area. Although reports of official complicity were common, the government did not investigate any instances of official complicity in trafficking-related offenses. Therefore Belize remained on Tier 2 Watch List for the second consecutive year.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Implement the anti-trafficking law by vigorously prosecuting traffickers and imposing strong prison sentences upon those convicted. • Consistently apply formal procedures to identify victims of sex and labor trafficking among vulnerable groups and refer identified victims to services. • Actively investigate reports of potential trafficking crimes and official complicity. • Investigate and prosecute child sex tourists. • Hold complicit officials, including those who attempt to shield traffickers from prosecution, accountable through prosecution and conviction. • Provide adequate funding for specialized victim services for all victims, including men and minors, directly and by funding NGOs. • Thoroughly enforce the prohibition on off-duty police officers providing security for bars and restaurants where commercial sex acts occur. • Continue to ensure victims are not penalized for unlawful acts, including immigration violations, their traffickers compelled them to commit. • Implement the national anti-trafficking plan in accordance with its agreed timeline and disburse resources to its implementation. • Increase efforts to identify forced labor through recruiter participation in the national labor recruiter registry and prevention programs with migrant workers.

PROSECUTION

The government increased prosecution efforts. The 2013 Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Act criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties of up to eight years' imprisonment for offenses involving adult victims, and up to 12 years' imprisonment for offenses involving child victims. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with respect to sex trafficking, commensurate with other serious crimes, such as rape. Additionally, the 2013 Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (Prohibition) Act criminalized various offenses relating to the prostitution of anyone younger than 18.

The government opened 10 new trafficking investigations—three for forced labor and seven for sex trafficking—compared to three new investigations in 2018 and nine in 2017. There were no ongoing trafficking investigations from previous years. The government did not initiate any trafficking prosecutions in 2019, but there were ongoing cases from previous reporting periods against four accused traffickers, all of whom awaited trial on bail. The government reported convicting one trafficker on two counts of sex trafficking in March 2020. This was Belize's second conviction under the 2013 trafficking law; the first occurred in early 2016. A dedicated police unit of five officers conducted trafficking investigations and operations. The judiciary designated a Supreme Court Justice and a Magistrate judge to provide specialized attention to trafficking cases, who along with other justices and judges received anti-trafficking training. Observers reported greater recognition amongst government officials of staffing and funding gaps in the anti-trafficking unit during the reporting period, although the government still had an inconsistent and insufficient police response and investigative capacity. Others noted a slow and cumbersome justice system, a lack of accountability at all levels, and an overall lack of resources, which affected the government's ability to address crime, including trafficking.

The government continued to cooperate with foreign governments on international trafficking cases. In one instance, the Belizean government collaborated with officials in Honduras to repatriate victims and exchange information, leading to the convictions of two sex traffickers in Honduras in January 2019. The government provided or collaborated with NGOs and international donors to provide anti-trafficking training, including on victim identification and referral, to the anti-trafficking police unit, immigration officers, prosecutors, judges, prison officials, and social workers. However, limited intelligence gathering, inconsistent application of formal victim identification procedures, and suspected complicity among some law enforcement officials hampered the identification of trafficking crimes. During the reporting period, the government reprimanded two officers for violating a policy instituted in 2018 prohibiting off-duty police officers from providing security for bars and restaurants where commercial sex acts frequently occurred. The government did not disclose the extent of the reprimand, and observers were concerned that inconsistent enforcement of the prohibition would diminish its efficacy. During the reporting period, officers violating the policy without reprimand may have inhibited police from investigating allegations of trafficking and dissuaded victims from reporting trafficking. Observers decried indicators of slow official responsiveness to reports of potential trafficking and complicity. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in trafficking offenses; however, corruption and official complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns, inhibiting law enforcement action.

PROTECTION

The government maintained efforts to protect victims. Authorities identified 24 potential victims in 2019—all foreign nationals—compared to 17 potential victims in 2018 and 17 potential victims in 2017. Seventeen of the 24 victims, including one child, were exploited in labor trafficking, while the remaining seven, four of whom were children, were identified as victims of sex trafficking. While a majority of victims were Central American, there were also five victims of Indian nationality and one Mexican victim. The government employed a procedure to screen for potential victims among vulnerable groups, such as individuals in commercial sex and migrants, but also worked to draft an updated

procedure. Observers reported more consistency in victim identification but stated gaps still existed, such as authorities who rarely took action in response to credible reports of potential trafficking victims by NGOs, possibly leading to fewer victim identifications and weak victim protection. Although Belize's anti-trafficking law exempted victims from punishment for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit, gaps in identification procedures may have left mis- or unidentified victims vulnerable to punishment for unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit. Observers reported otherwise-improved adherence to this policy, with anecdotally fewer instances of authorities arresting or jailing victims due to immigration violations during raids. During the reporting period, the anti-trafficking council collaborated with an international organization to draft a victim identification and assistance protocol specific to migrant children. The national anti-trafficking council ensured social workers accompanied the anti-trafficking police unit on operations and raids conducted by the council's operations subcommittee to screen, identify, and assist victims. However, social workers were not routinely present when other law enforcement units conducted operations and raids on commercial sex establishments. Victims' fear of detention or deportation may have contributed to their reluctance to report trafficking to law enforcement officers.

The government reported providing services to all 24 potential victims, including food, clothing, medical care, and housing. The Department of Human Services referred two of the 24 victims to an NGO-run shelter at the government's expense. The government coordinated and funded shelter, medical care, and psychological services to adult victims through the Alternative Care Unit and to child victims through the Child Protection System and foster care. The government trained and partnered with domestic violence NGOs to provide shelter and services to adult female trafficking victims. There were no shelters accessible to male victims; instead, the government arranged to rent lodging for any male victims identified. Service providers developed victim care plans with victim participation with the goal of encouraging independence, and these plans included presenting adult victims with the option of staying in shelters, safe houses, or independent living and placing minors in the child protection system or in kinship care and independent living upon reaching adulthood.

Government social workers monitored foster care placements for child victims and developed individual case plans for each child, which included a home study to determine if placement was in the best interest of the child. The government noted the support offered by foster families empowered victims and led to the country's first trafficking conviction under the new law, in 2016. Experts expressed concerns about the lack of education about trafficking for some foster parents, uneven coordination and communication between government agencies and foster parents, and limited availability of psycho-social care in general, including for trafficking victims. As in the previous year, the government allocated 200,000 Belizean dollars (\$100,000) to anti-trafficking efforts, some of which it dedicated to victim services. In total, the government dedicated 109,000 Belizean dollars (\$54,500) to victim services in 2019, which included food, clothing, medical expenses, counseling, stipends, and repatriation expenses.

Victims had the right to testify remotely by video feed; because the courts lacked video testimony capabilities, victim-witnesses were instead given the option to testify in court behind an opaque screen. The government allowed foreign national victims to submit written testimony after returning to their home countries. In past years, the government conducted risk assessments to determine the safety of victims participating in trials against their traffickers, but did not report doing so in 2019. Court delays affecting the justice system as a whole and fear of retaliation by traffickers

may have led foreign national victims to decline or withdraw cooperation with law enforcement and return to their home countries. Per government policy, foreign victims identified in potential trafficking cases could be granted temporary residency status regardless of their cooperation with investigations or prosecutions; the government assigned a social worker to assist all 19 foreign national victims in obtaining immigration relief, housing, and medical services. The government reported repatriating seven victims in 2019; at least one of these repatriations was facilitated by an international organization. The government issued no-cost residency permits to three victims. Victims could apply for work permits free of cost, and the government received one such application in 2019. Courts could order victim restitution upon a trafficker's conviction but did not do so in 2019.

PREVENTION

The government slightly increased its prevention efforts. The government continued to implement a 2018-2020 national anti-trafficking action plan, which designated various government entities as responsible for the plan's activities. Under the national action plan, the government committed to reduce vulnerability to and the demand for trafficking, generate national research and data on trafficking, monitor and evaluate the implementation of policies and programs, create a comprehensive and integrated system of victim services and assistance, and strengthen mechanisms for investigating and prosecuting trafficking using a victim-centered approach. The national anti-trafficking council established a trafficking information kiosk at an international airport, which included resources for potential victims in multiple languages. The government also funded awareness-raising efforts, including billboards in English and Spanish and public service announcements in English, Spanish, and Hindi with a "crime stoppers" hotline number. An NGO operated the "crime stoppers" hotline; it did not report receiving any trafficking-related calls during the reporting period. The government made efforts to reduce the demand for child sex tourism, including by continuing to disseminate public service announcements on the penalties for sex with minors and the links between tourism and the demand for commercial sex. The government did not, however, investigate or prosecute any child sex tourists. The government cooperated with the United States to deny or otherwise prevent entry to 12 convicted sex offenders. The government continued to distribute brochures on labor rights to foreign workers applying for work permits. The labor code required labor recruiters to register, but the government reported that none did so. Labor inspectors adopted a new policy of joint inspections with immigration and social security officers; these officials received training in victim identification and referral. The government provided an anti-trafficking handbook and training to all heads of diplomatic missions and consulates.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Belize, and traffickers exploit victims from Belize abroad. Groups considered most at risk for trafficking in Belize include women, men, children, LGBTI persons, and migrants. Sex traffickers exploit Belizean and foreign women, men, and girls and LGBTI persons, primarily from Central America, in bars, nightclubs, hotels, and brothels. Family members facilitate the sex trafficking of Belizean women and girls. Foreign men, women, and children—particularly from Central America,

Mexico, and Asia—migrate voluntarily to Belize in search of work, and traffickers often exploit victims using false promises of relatively high-paying jobs or take advantage of migrants' illegal status and exploit them in forced labor in restaurants, shops, domestic work, and agriculture. In tourist regions, foreign child sex tourists, primarily from the United States, exploit child sex trafficking victims. Alleged trafficking-related complicity by government officials remains a problem. NGOs reported police and immigration officers took bribes in return for ignoring trafficking, facilitating illegal entries, failing to report suspected victims and perpetrators, and failing to act on reported cases under their jurisdiction.