

## 2014 Country Report LIBERIA: (Tier 2)

Liberia is a source and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking. Most trafficking victims originate from and are exploited within the country's borders, where they are subjected to domestic servitude, forced begging, sex trafficking, or forced labor in street vending, rubber plantations, and alluvial diamond mines. Traffickers typically operate independently and are commonly family members who may promise poorer relatives a better life for their children. Children sent to work as domestic servants for their wealthier relatives are vulnerable to forced labor or, to a lesser extent, commercial sexual exploitation. Orphaned children remain susceptible to exploitation, including in street selling and prostitution. A small number of Liberian men, women, and children are subjected to human trafficking in other West African countries, including Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. Victims of transnational trafficking come to Liberia from neighboring West African countries, including Sierra Leone, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, and Nigeria, and are subjected to the same types of exploitation as internally trafficked victims. During the reporting period, women from Tunisia and Morocco were subjected to sex trafficking in Liberia.

The Government of Liberia does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so. The government reported increased numbers of investigations and prosecutions of alleged trafficking offenses, and convictions of foreign traffickers compared to the previous reporting period. It identified and referred a greater number of victims to protective services, formally adopted a standard operating procedure (SOP) to assist victims, and trained police and other first responders to use the SOP. It also adopted a national action plan to combat human trafficking and dedicated funds to implement the plan over a five-year period. However, it has not yet created trafficking-specific protective services for victims. Despite the country's significant internal trafficking problem, Liberia has not successfully convicted a Liberian national for trafficking in persons.

**Recommendations for Liberia:** Continue prosecuting trafficking offenses and convicting and punishing trafficking offenders, with an increased focus on trafficking cases involving Liberian nationals; vigorously investigate, prosecute, and convict government officials complicit in trafficking offenses; provide additional training to law enforcement officials and magistrates to apply the anti-trafficking law and to distinguish trafficking crimes from cases of human smuggling or kidnapping; implement and educate NGOs, law enforcement personnel, magistrates, and other relevant government officials on the "Direct Assistance and Support to Trafficked Victims Standard Operating Procedures," so that these officials learn to proactively identify and provide protective services to trafficking victims; create and adequately fund a shelter specifically for trafficking victims; and increase efforts to educate the public about the dangers of human trafficking.

### **Prosecution**

The Government of Liberia demonstrated an increase in anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. Liberia's 2005 Act to Ban Trafficking in Persons prohibits all forms of transnational and internal trafficking. It prescribes a minimum sentence of one year's imprisonment for the trafficking of adults and six years' imprisonment for the trafficking of children, but does not include a

maximum sentence for the trafficking of adults. The prescribed penalties for the sex and labor trafficking of children are sufficiently stringent, but the prescribed penalties for sex and labor trafficking of adults are not, nor are they commensurate with the prescribed penalties for other serious offenses, such as rape. The government reported six investigations, two prosecutions, and two convictions during the reporting period, which represented a slight increase from five investigations, two prosecutions, and one conviction in the previous reporting period. The two convicted trafficking offenders were Lebanese nationals found guilty of subjecting one Tunisian and six Moroccan women to forced prostitution in Liberia; they were convicted in December 2013, but at the close of the reporting period, the defense filed and was granted a motion for a new trial, which the prosecution is now appealing at Liberia's Supreme Court. To date, no Liberian trafficking offenders have been convicted under Liberia's anti-trafficking law, despite the country's significant internal trafficking problem.

All section heads of the Liberian National Police (LNP) received basic training on how to report suspected trafficking cases to the Women and Children Protection Section (WACPS), though they did not receive specialized training in investigating human trafficking crimes. WACPS continued to provide a mandatory three-week comprehensive anti-trafficking training for all new officers. Bribery at border stations, capacity issues, and generalized corruption within the judiciary continue to hamper trafficking investigations and prosecutions. Although the Government of Liberia did not report any prosecutions of government employees for alleged complicity in trafficking related offenses during the reporting period, President Sirleaf dismissed several high-ranking government officials after investigations revealed that they were involved in inhibiting two ongoing trafficking investigations.

### **Protection**

The government increased efforts to identify and protect victims of human trafficking. It identified 41 trafficking victims; seven foreign adult women were victims of forced prostitution; and 34 Liberian children were victims of forced labor. The majority of these victims were identified by police and immigration officials. This is a significant increase compared to the previous year, during which the government identified only five victims of trafficking. All 41 victims were referred to NGOs and international organizations for services, although the Ministry of Labor (MOL) provided shelter, food, medical, and psychological services to the seven adult victims for six months. There are no government run shelters or safe-homes specifically for trafficking victims in Liberia and the government relied heavily on NGOs and civil society groups to provide basic assistance and financial support to victims. The government formally adopted SOPs for trafficking victim support in October 2013. Although victim identification and referrals improved slightly, immigration, social services, and law enforcement agencies continue to have limited capacity to identify victims or provide them with services. The 2005 Act to Ban Trafficking in Persons absolves victims from responsibility for unlawful acts committed as a result of being trafficked, and there were no reports that victims were punished during the year.

The aforementioned seven adult victims were given a choice between repatriation and temporary residency in Liberia; they all chose to temporarily stay in Liberia and participated in the investigation and prosecution of their traffickers.

**Prevention**

The government sustained modest efforts to prevent trafficking in persons. The government's Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force held bi-monthly meetings and finalized a five-year anti-trafficking national action plan, which the president and her cabinet formally adopted and publicly launched in October 2013. In March 2014, the government formally allocated the equivalent of approximately \$152,000 to fund implementation of the plan. The MOL continued to support anti-trafficking awareness campaigns through radio public service messages and billboards. The government did not make any discernible efforts to reduce the demand for forced labor or commercial sex acts during the reporting period. The government instructed its diplomats serving abroad not to engage in trafficking in persons, including domestic servitude.