



New Zealand US TIP ranking ‘downgrade’ not surprising to anti-trafficking coalition

New Zealand has been downgraded from the top ‘Tier 1’ category to a ‘Tier 2’ ranking by the US Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons in its 2021 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, published late last week.

The US TIP report is an annual report issued by the U.S State Department which reviews the issue of human trafficking in each country and assesses what steps are being taken to address it by the relevant government, ranking the efforts accordingly.

In relation to New Zealand, the report found that “*the Government of New Zealand does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking*” and that the efforts that had been made “*were not serious and sustained compared to the efforts during the previous reporting period,*” downgrading New Zealand to Tier 2. A number of recommendations were made in the report that the Government should take to improve its efforts.

The Human Trafficking Research Coalition (HTRC) agrees with the finding that not enough is being done in New Zealand to counter human trafficking, and welcomes the recommendations put forward. We hope that the Government will take the findings and recommendations seriously and take proactive and urgent steps to prevent and counter trafficking in New Zealand.

Human trafficking in New Zealand

Both the exploitation of domestic and foreign individuals has been reported in New Zealand. Exploitation takes place in many forms, including forced labour, domestic service and sexual exploitation. As listed in the report, high risk sectors for forced labour include agriculture, dairy, construction, hospitality, and transport.

Children are also at risk of and subject to exploitation within New Zealand, including sexual exploitation. This can look like forced underage sex work on the streets, as well as online sexual abuse content shared through platforms like Instagram and Messenger, or in the tourism industry (for example coercion within massage parlours). As commented within the TIP report, it can occur within a household with people known to that child selling the child for sex or sexual services, often many times: “*Some gang members, boyfriends, family*

members, or others exploit young children and teenagers in sex trafficking by facilitating, purchasing, or forcing them to engage in commercial sex acts.”

Current efforts

The New Zealand Government has taken some steps in relation to trafficking, including the release of an updated anti-trafficking national action plan in March 2021 (the Plan). In the Plan the Government commits to implementing a number of measures that prevent the conditions that enable forced labour, people trafficking and slavery, as well as measures that identify and support victims and hold people who engage in the exploitation of others to account.

Despite these commitments, the TIP report recorded that New Zealand:

- Failed to sentence the majority of traffickers to terms of imprisonment;
- Despite convicting more offenders in cases of child sex trafficking than in previous years, failed to identify any of the victims in those cases as trafficking victims as it did not use a system to identify victims; and
- Had many officials and service providers that lacked an understanding of all forms of trafficking, weakening victim protection and potentially undermining the ability to recognize country trends.

The HTRC echo the concerns in the report, including those regarding victim identification. We consider that the support and safety of potential and confirmed victims needs to be a priority for the Government as well as the prosecution of perpetrators. It is essential that those at risk of or who are subject to exploitation feel confident to come forward for help, and that when they do so, officials and service providers can confidently identify them as victims so that the correct support can be obtained.

Key recommendations

The prioritized recommendations from the report included recommendations in relation to:

- Identification of victims, including proactive screening of vulnerable populations
- The investigation and prosecution of sex and labour cases
- The establishment of an identification and support system
- Improved training to key stakeholders
- Awareness raising materials
- Increased resourcing of anti-trafficking law enforcement
- Increased coordination with anti-trafficking NGOs and other social and civil society stakeholders.

There was also a specific recommendation in relation to domestic statute, that New Zealand legislation should explicitly define the sex trafficking of children as not requiring the use of deception or coercion.

HTRC response

The HTRC agrees with and endorses the recommendations listed in the report. Further, the HTRC recommends that the Government invest resources and effort to research the risk of and occurrence of exploitation in high-risk sectors and the risk to and exploitation of individuals from vulnerable communities. We also recommend the Government collect and share data on key trends and risks identified. We consider that the lack of research into trafficking within New Zealand and limited data collection is hindering New Zealand's efforts to combat trafficking.

We also consider steps to implement the recommendations need to be taken as a matter of urgency. Trafficking has no place in New Zealand, and the Tier 2 ranking is a wakeup call that more needs to be done, without delay.

"It is positive that New Zealand has taken some steps to combat trafficking, but as the TIP report clearly sets out, there is far more work that urgently needs to be done to prevent and address human trafficking in our country" Rebecca Kingi, World Vision NZ

"The Trafficking in Persons Report 2021 is right to draw attention to the gap in the Government's response around the trafficking of children for sexual purposes. This extreme type of sexual abuse uses children as commodities and urgently need to be addressed in New Zealand" - Eleanor Parkes, ECPAT Child Alert.

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