

# ON COUNTERING HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN

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**Abstract.** This article examines the state of counter-trafficking efforts in the Republic of Uzbekistan over a five-year period (2020–2025). Drawing on official statistics from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Statistics Agency of Uzbekistan, as well as on reports of the United States Department of State, the article analyzes the dynamics of trafficking-related offenses and the main forms of exploitation. It also reviews the national legal framework, the activities of the National Commission on Combating Human Trafficking and Decent Work, and relevant international programs.

**Keywords:** human trafficking, Uzbekistan, national commission, sexual exploitation, Palermo Protocol, U.S. Department of State, International Labour Organization.

Human trafficking remains one of the most pressing transnational problems of our time. For Uzbekistan, situated at the crossroads of Central Asian migration routes, this problem is highly relevant [1]. According to the Global Organized Crime Index, in 2023 Uzbekistan ranked 29th among 193 states in terms of the prevalence of human trafficking, with a score of 7.5 out of 10 [1]. Over the past decade the country has carried out a substantial reform of its legislation and institutional system in this area, which has affected statistical trends and drawn the attention of foreign partners.

According to the Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the total number of registered crimes rose from 62,081 in 2020 to 132,298 in 2024, a 2.1-fold increase over five years [2]. Against this background, trafficking-related statistics fluctuate: in 2023 a decline of 11.1% was recorded compared with 2022 [3], whereas in 2024 the figure rose by 22.9% [4]. By the end of 2024, legal measures had been taken against 219 persons involved in human trafficking [5].

The most detailed data are provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs for 2025: 177 trafficking cases were registered, of which 92 (more than half) involved sexual exploitation,

with the remainder involving labor exploitation and the trafficking of infants. According to the Ministry's Criminal Investigation Department, issues related to infant trafficking and forced labor have been largely brought under control, whereas sexual exploitation continues to account for the largest share of such offenses. In January–March 2026, 57 new cases were identified, and police officers prevented 72 women at risk of sexual exploitation from leaving the country [6].

According to the annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report of the U.S. Department of State, in 2021 authorities conducted 162 investigations (96 for sexual exploitation, 11 for forced labor, and 55 for unspecified child exploitation), compared with 566 in 2020; the number of defendants was 155, compared with 129 a year earlier [7]. In 2023, 91 defendants and 72 convictions were recorded, and 193 victims (111 of sexual exploitation, 82 of forced labor) were identified and referred for rehabilitation [9]. In 2024 these figures increased: 85 defendants (83 for sexual exploitation, two for forced labor) and 115 convictions (113 and two, respectively). A total of 186 victims (175 of sexual exploitation, 11 of forced labor) were identified and referred for assistance, and an additional 22 Uzbekistani nationals were recognized as victims abroad — in Turkey, Russia, India, and the United Arab Emirates; including 44 victims identified by NGOs, 230 individuals in total received state support, compared with 72 in the previous reporting period [9]. Following the 2025 report, Uzbekistan retained its Tier 2 ranking, indicating that the government does not fully meet minimum standards but is making significant efforts to do so [9; 10].

In addition, according to a survey conducted by the “Ijtimoiy Fikr” Public Opinion Research Center (2025), 87% of respondents consider human trafficking a serious threat, and 73.1% note an improvement in the situation over the past five years. Of those surveyed, 68.9% identified labor exploitation as the most common form, 42.1% identified sexual exploitation, and 65.6% named seeking work abroad as the main channel of involvement [11].

The legal basis of Uzbekistan's counter-trafficking system is the Law “On Combating Human Trafficking” of 17 April 2008, No. ZRU-154, which defines human trafficking in accordance with the 2000 Palermo Protocol [12; 13]. The Law of 17 August 2020, No. ZRU-633, approved a new edition of the law that substantially expanded victim-protection mechanisms [13]. Criminal liability is established under Article 135 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan, with differentiated sanctions for aggravating circumstances — offenses committed against a minor, with the use of violence, involving movement across the

state border, or for the purpose of organ removal [13]. Resolution No. 12 of the Plenum of the Supreme Court of 24 November 2009 clarified the interpretation of the elements of slavery, servitude, and exploitation [13]. In 2025 sanctions were further tightened: the use of forged documents is now punishable by 5 to 10 years of imprisonment (previously 5 to 8 years), and an offense resulting in the death of the victim is punishable by 10 to 15 years [6].

Uzbekistan's institutional system has been repeatedly reformed. Presidential Resolution No. PP-911 of 8 July 2008 approved the National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking [14]. Presidential Decree No. UP-5775 of 30 July 2019 established the National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking and Forced Labor and created the institution of the National Rapporteur [15]. Decree No. UP-210 of 21 December 2023 transformed the commission into the National Commission on Combating Human Trafficking and Decent Work, comprising two subcommissions — one on human trafficking (chaired by the Ministry of Internal Affairs) and one on decent work (chaired by the Ministry of Employment) [16]. The Commission, coordinated by the Chairman of the Senate acting as National Rapporteur, developed an action plan against online human trafficking in 2023–2024 [16].

To assist victims, a Republican Rehabilitation Center operates alongside regional victim-identification commissions [14]. Under Article 12 of the law, victims are granted protective measures, the right to temporary residence in the country, and exemption from liability for acts committed under coercion [17].

International organizations have also played an active role. In particular, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) implements projects on labor migration, border management, and counter-trafficking, guided by the “3P” principles — Prevention, Protection, Prosecution [21; 22]. The International Labour Organization has cooperated with the government and civil society since 2013, monitoring labor conditions and supporting ratification of Conventions No. 29 and No. 105 and the 2014 Protocol [13; 18]. The OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan has, since 2006, provided assistance in strengthening legislation, training specialists, and organizing seminars [23; 24]. The Delegation of the European Union funded a project in 2021–2022 to support labor migrants during the pandemic, while USAID, under its Legal Reform Program, funded a project to expand access to legal services for trafficking victims [25]. The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs funded a 2020–2022 project of the NGO “Istiqbolli Avlod” to expand reintegration services for victims and strengthen the capacity of law

enforcement agencies in 12 regions, the Republic of Karakalpakstan, and Tashkent [25]. UNICEF and UNDP, together with IOM and the OSCE, support the Center for Assistance to Trafficking Victims, which provides medical, legal, and psychological support [26].

Analysis of the statistics for 2020–2025 shows that Uzbekistan's counter-trafficking system is being transformed in response to current realities: indicators fluctuate against a backdrop of overall rising crime, and the predominant form of exploitation remains the sexual exploitation of women traveling abroad in search of work. At the same time, the updated legal framework — from the 2020 amendment of the law to the 2023 Decree No. UP-210 — has allowed Uzbekistan to maintain its Tier 2 ranking in the U.S. Department of State's classification. Further improvements in effectiveness depend on expanding preventive work with labor migrants, strengthening victim identification, and deepening cooperation with foreign partners.

In light of the foregoing, it is proposed that the following aspects be addressed:

**1. Pre-departure prevention.** Since 65.6% of the population associates the risk of trafficking with travel abroad, and the majority of cases involve the sexual exploitation of women migrants, it would be advisable to introduce mandatory pre-departure briefings through migration services and airports, including brief instruction, hotline contacts, and verification of the legality of job offers prior to the issuance of passports or visas.

**2. Stronger oversight of intermediaries and recruitment agencies.** Many cases originate from fraudulent job offers abroad. Stricter licensing checks of recruitment and travel agencies, a public registry of accredited overseas employment intermediaries, and criminal liability for unlicensed “recruiters” are needed.

**3. Expansion of the rehabilitation network.** The country currently operates, in effect, a single specialized facility for victims; regional crisis centers offering psychological, legal, and medical assistance, together with secure channels for anonymous reporting — including for male victims of labor exploitation, who are less likely to seek help — are needed to cover all regions.

**4. Deeper bilateral cooperation with destination countries.** Expanding extradition agreements and joint investigative teams with Turkey, Russia, the United Arab Emirates, and other key destination countries would enable faster disruption of transnational trafficking networks.

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