

# Stop Trafficking! AwarenessAdvocacyAction

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FOCUS: This month's newsletter gives highlights of the 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report.

The <u>2025 Trafficking in Persons Report</u> was published quietly on the Department of State's website on September 29, three months past its congressionally established deadline. The report covers government actions from April 1, 2024 through March 31, 2025, and includes some notable changes.

The TIP report is usually released with a "launch ceremony" featuring the Trafficking in Persons ambassador and antitrafficking "TIP Heroes" from around the world. The report, initially scheduled to be released in June, was <u>reportedly</u> cancelled while the staff at the state department office responsible for ending human trafficking was cut by more than 70%.

The 2025 Report does not include the 'TIP Heroes' section. While the report's introduction reiterates the commitment to tackling the crime and pushing for action, it does not include the section from past years that identifies individual government officials and individuals who have made outstanding contributions to combating human trafficking. The Topics of Special Interest in previous reports are covered under An Evolving Response to Addressing Core Challenges in the 2025 TIP Report.

In <u>February</u>, it was announced that the TIP report would not include a section on LGBTQ victims, nor does it contain any language around the LGBTQ community. This absence is notable, as prior TIP reports have been evident in pointing out the disproportionate impact of human trafficking on LGBTQ communities, which are already highly vulnerable and targeted by human traffickers.

This year's report recorded the highest-ever convictions for labor trafficking by countries around the world. It also highlights the frequent challenge of forced criminality, where victims are compelled to commit crimes like financial fraud or illegal commercial sex for the benefit of their traffickers, but are then wrongly penalized by the justice system. The report recommends that governments implement the "non-punishment principle," which maintains that victims should not be punished for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked.

A significant portion of the 2025 Report is a retrospective look at the past 25 years, marked by the passage of the **Trafficking Victims Protection** Act (TVPA) in October 2000. This bipartisan legislation created the framework for ending human trafficking globally. It established the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons within the United States Department of State to collaborate with governments worldwide in combating this crime and to produce the annual Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP Report). The US Trafficking Victims Protection Act requires the State Department to provide the report to Congress each year, no later than June 30.

This report assesses government anti-trafficking efforts in 188 countries and territories around efforts across the "3Ps" of prosecution, protection, and prevention. Today, there are 138 countries and territories with comprehensive anti-trafficking laws and 155 countries and territories with national anti-trafficking coordinating bodies.

Also in 2000, the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons legally bound nations in what is known as the United Nations

(continued on next page)



Trafficking in Persons Protocol to combat human trafficking by providing a standard definition, establishing criminalization requirements, and mandating protection for victims and to cooperate internationally to fight this crime. This marked the beginning of the global anti-trafficking movement that has grown in both influence and determination over the past 25 years. There are currently 183 State parties to the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, creating a near-universal international legal framework.

In 2015, the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act (JVTA) was enacted to provide a formal platform for trafficking survivors to advise and make recommendations on federal anti-trafficking policies to the President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (PITF). Today, there are six countries and multilateral organizations with survivor advisory councils.

#### A Brief Look Back

Understanding of human trafficking has significantly evolved over the last 25 years, driven by survivors, civil society, and various organizations. Most laws now recognize that trafficking can occur within countries and not require movement. This evolving awareness has led to historic achievements in the anti-trafficking movement, strengthening governments, protecting lives, and holding traffickers accountable.

# An Evolving Response to Addressing Core Challenges

Trafficking in persons, including forced labor and sex trafficking, is often a hidden crime that complicates criminal investigations as traffickers cover up their activities. Victims may not self-identify due to fears of harm or repercussions. Governments have a responsibility under the United Nations' Trafficking in Persons Protocol to criminalize human trafficking, hold perpetrators accountable, and develop legal frameworks for prosecution.

To effectively identify and support victims, proactive screening and specialized services are essential, although many continue to face challenges in implementing these measures. Training for front-line professionals is often lacking, which can hinder victim identification.

A victim-centered, trauma-informed approach is increasingly recognized as vital for building trust and enhancing law enforcement efforts against traffickers. Despite growing knowledge of human trafficking, misconceptions persist, leading to a need for comprehensive awareness campaigns and prevention strategies.

Governments are also focusing on trafficking occurring domestically, as highlighted in a 2024 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report showing that 58% of trafficking victims in 2022 were exploited within their own country. Understanding local trafficking issues allows for tailored responses that can effectively deter traffickers and support victims.

## Addressing Official Complicity in Trafficking Crimes

When nations adopted the United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol in 2000, they acknowledged that human trafficking must be eliminated. Essential to this is that the country itself is not officially complicit in any aspect of trafficking, which can occur in many ways, from official statesponsored trafficking to failure to conduct oversight of the crime.

While many countries have taken steps to prevent official complicity in human trafficking, several companies engage in state-sanctioned forced labor. In some countries, government officials financially benefit from human trafficking, and forced labor is a form of punishment for political opposition. Reports indicate that Ukrainians in Russianoccupied territories in Ukraine, including those in detention, are forced to fight against their own country or engage in other labor, such as clearing rubble and disposing of corpses. In China, the Chinese Communist Party is exploiting Uyghurs and members of different ethnic and religious minority groups through a government policy of widespread forced labor and detention, which may be reframed as communal service opportunities, or "poverty alleviation programs".

The 2025 report names Cambodia a "state sponsor" of trafficking for the first time, a designation that can lead to sanctions. It alleges senior Cambodian government officials profit from human trafficking by allowing properties they own to be "used by online scam operators to exploit victims in forced labor and forced criminality".

Finally, governments may acquire financial benefits by subjecting others to forced labor, which harms not only victims but also other countries and their citizens. For example, online scams have swindled innocent people worldwide out of tens of billions of dollars, including people in the United States.

# Responding to Survivors of Human Trafficking in the Healthcare Setting

Feedback from survivors of human trafficking suggests that as many as 90 percent had some contact with healthcare workers as a victim of trafficking, implying that healthcare workers are in a key position to identify and aid both victims and survivors of trafficking and highlighting the necessity of all healthcare workers to be trained on the signs of human trafficking and trauma-informed care. The following are some recommendations that are included for the healthcare community:

- Creating a safe and supportive environment, including traumainformed care for the victim or survivor, by prioritizing safety as well as support staff. Join local, state, and national task forces and build community support, including local NGOs.
- Provide accessible, culturally sensitive care by offering in-person interpretation services and honoring preferences for same-sex healthcare workers, when possible, while building patient trust through clear communication, confidentiality assurances, and warm referrals to appropriate services.
- Include provisions to ensure patient autonomy, which refers to the patient's right to make their own decisions about their healthcare and informed care. Evaluate success beyond patient disclosure.

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# Awareness

# Identification and Referral: Streamlining Victim Services

Adequate protection measures, tailored to the individual needs of trafficking victims, are instrumental in preventing re-victimization. These measures, including secure housing, legal support, and connections to social services, significantly reduce vulnerability. However, many governments lack efficient and effective processes for identifying victims and referring them to care. In contrast, others with such systems lack the capacity or resources to implement identification procedures and deliver effective victim services consistently.

## **Forced Criminality**

Forced criminality unfolds when a trafficker employs force, fraud, or coercion to compel another person to engage in criminal conduct for the benefit of the trafficker. These crimes, which are part of a multifaceted network, may include: smuggling of contraband, illegal commercial sex, narcotic production and distribution, financial fraud, theft or robbery, begging, scamming, looting, extortion, and kidnapping or immigration related offenses, such as fraudulently applying for non-work visas, not having proper visas or other documentation, or possessing forged identity documents. Victims are more likely to get caught and be charged for these crimes than the traffickers who force them to engage in criminal activities.

Armed groups forcibly recruit children from vulnerable groups to serve as combatants and informants. At the same time, traffickers also exploit individuals using fake job offers and then force them, through physical violence, restricted movement, and the withholding of food and water, into operating internet scams. Large-scale scam operations have proliferated in Southeast Asia and are increasingly found in other regions around the world, reportedly netting an estimated \$25 billion to \$64 billion globally in 2023.

Traffickers instill a fear of law enforcement in victims, making victims believe that seeking help will result in penalization. The interconnectivity of crimes committed by both the trafficker and the victim impedes law enforcement work to identify and disrupt trafficking networks. The interconnectivity of crimes committed by both the trafficker and the victim impedes law enforcement work to identify and disrupt trafficking networks.

Often, law enforcement and criminal justice personnel who encounter victims of forced criminality are experts in other areas and may struggle to identify that seemingly apparent criminals are actually victims hidden within a complex criminal scheme. As a result, victims of forced criminality are often inappropriately penalized solely for crimes committed as a direct result of being trafficked, and law enforcement loses the ability to collect evidence to build a case against criminals.

It is crucial to shift the narrative from punishment to protection in the fight against forced criminality. Stronger trust between victims and authorities enables survivors to access needed services and support law enforcement efforts. By recognizing the realities of human trafficking victims who experience forced criminality, governments can better promote accountability for traffickers and prevent future exploitation.



## Building a Way Forward

Human Traffickers are constantly adapting to world events, societal developments, and technological innovations. They capitalize on crises and conflicts that displace populations and create vulnerabilities. Many governments have observed new trends in how traffickers target victims and the industries where they seek to perpetrate their crimes.

Instability is a major driver of human trafficking. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees are vulnerable to conflict-related sexual violence as they are forced to take desperate risks to secure necessities like food, water, and shelter. Recent conflicts illustrate that vulnerability in these situations extends beyond sex trafficking and includes forced labor, the unlawful recruitment or use of child soldiers, and forced criminality, and encompasses not just IDPs and refugees, but also those who remain in their home communities. Many governments are learning to confront this challenge by building trafficking prevention and victim protection measures into their humanitarian response plans as conflicts emerge.

Extreme weather conditions also displace populations and make people vulnerable to both sex and labor trafficking. In response, governments are increasingly including anti-trafficking measures in their emergency preparedness plans.

Traffickers also exploit technological innovations to groom and traffic children and other individuals for sex and labor. They have also significantly expanded online scam operations that run by forcing trafficking victims to carry out scams that defraud individuals around the world.

Many governments are now leveraging these same technologies, including artificial intelligence, to expand access to services for victims, expedite the processing of trafficking cases in court, increase education and outreach, and foster anti-trafficking partnerships.

Partnerships, whether at the local, national, or international level, are critical in the fight against human trafficking. Collaboration among governments, civil society, the private sector, and survivors plays a crucial role in developing and implementing sustainable programs and policies to combat trafficking. When governments form partnerships with local and community-based actors, they can tailor anti-trafficking programs and policies to the local context and adapt global best practices to the specific environment, thereby achieving the best results. However, traffickers adjust their methods to evade new anti-trafficking measures.

In recent years, civil society advocates have urged companies to monitor their manufacturing processes and address instances of materials produced with forced labor, such as cobalt in renewable energy technologies, cotton or textiles in the garment industry, and seafood processing in the fishing industry. Global supply chains are highly complex and dynamic systems that span multiple countries and companies, making it challenging to combat forced labor and other exploitative practices. There is also growing awareness of the need to monitor supply chains for inputs produced by state-sponsored forced labor, including by China, Cuba, and North Korea. Some governments have taken actions to prevent goods made with forced labor from entering their markets by enacting laws to prohibit the import of such goods, as well as by passing legislation that addresses specific concerns related to forced labor, such as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act.

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### The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Trafficking in Persons

A focus of this year's report is the dual role of technology. The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has introduced new complexities to the anti-trafficking landscape, presenting both opportunities and challenges for traffickers and those working to combat this crime. Collaboration among technology companies, law enforcement, and trafficking experts, along with continuous technological innovation, can transform these challenges into opportunities for more effective prevention, intervention, and protection of victims.

However, criminals are increasingly weaponizing AI to enhance their operations, using translation tools to craft culturally nuanced messages that resonate with victims in their native language. AI gives traffickers an unprecedented ability to target potential victims by scanning social media data to gain insights into individual vulnerabilities and develop tailored exploitation strategies to trap victims at an unprecedented scale. AI-generated text-to-image technology, deepfake photo and video manipulation, voice and video generation, and other forms of content manipulation are used to target and exploit children and adults.

Traffickers may also use AI technologies to mask their identities and victims' identities – portraying themselves as children to build trust with potential child victims online, impersonating trusted friends and family to deceive and control the individual, or as in some online scam operations, concealing labor trafficking victims' identities while exploiting them in forced criminality, often forcing them to use AI-translated scripts and language models to target other victims globally.

#### Leveraging AI for Anti-trafficking Efforts

Al can also be a powerful prevention and intervention tool and may be used to protect social media platforms by detecting and flagging harmful or inappropriate content, identifying and preventing unlawful activities, and flagging concerning conversations and suspicious job advertisements in real-time. It can be used to educate potential victims (which is ALL of us).

Al technologies can help identify and assist trafficking victims by analyzing online commercial sex advertisements, enabling law enforcement agencies to make data-driven decisions and improve their operational efficiency.

#### Combatting Forced Labor in Fishing and Seafood Processing

Fishing, aquaculture, and seafood processing play a critical role in the global economy, employing millions of workers, feeding billions of people, and driving hundreds of billions of dollars in annual trade. However, the industry can abuse migrant seafarers in forced labor through deception, wage withholding, debt-based coercion, and physical, psychological, sexual, and other abuses.

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing harms marinè ecosystems and the communities that depend on them for food and livelihoods. Companies have adjusted to overfished shoals by sending vessels farther out to sea, keeping seafarers, against their will, onboard for months or years longer than their original contracts. Seafarers are forced to fish illegal stock, including threatened, endangered, and protected species. Some fishing vessels purposefully obscure the origin and species of their catch to conceal environmental harm and labor rights abuses.

There is now a broader awareness that some of the world's largest and farthest-reaching fishing fleets, which account for most of the annual global marine capture, use forced labor in fishing practices that harm marine ecosystems and flood global markets with unethically and illegally sourced products. With this knowledge, governments, IOs, NGOs, and industry must act.

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### Forced Labor Import Prohibitions

According to the International Labor Organization, an estimated 17.4 million people are exploited in forced labor in the private economy, embedded in the supply chains of major industries such as agriculture, construction, and manufacturing. Additionally, 3.9 million individuals are exploited by state-imposed forced labor in China and several other countries. Through complex supply chains, legitimate companies and unknowing consumers are often connected to human rights abuses. Additionally, forced labor causes widespread economic harm to workers, resulting in lower wages and degraded working conditions. Import prohibitions on goods made with forced labor are one tool governments can deploy.

The U.S. Tariff Act of 1930 prohibits importing products that are mined, produced, or manufactured, wholly or in part, by forced labor, including by forced or indentured child labor. In 2021, Congress passed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) as a targeted response to the Chinese Communist Party's systematic use of forced labor against Uyghurs and members of other ethnic and religious minorities from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in China. Canada, Mexico, and the European Union (EU) have all taken similar action. Countries lacking robust import prohibitions risk becoming a dumping ground for goods made with forced labor, as importers are increasingly turned away from markets with stronger protections.

# Empowering Survivors and Addressing Human Trafficking through Advisory Bodies

Survivors of trafficking, with their unique perspective, offer expertise that can significantly enhance anti-trafficking efforts at every level of government. Their insights can help sharpen the prosecution, protection, and prevention response to this crime. Establishing and supporting advisory bodies as a formal platform is an advantageous model for governments to engage survivors as experts and equal partners in a meaningful way.

Advisory bodies can ensure government anti-trafficking efforts are grounded in the reality of human trafficking. They offer a pathway for governments to receive insights into the hidden complexities of traffickers and their networks, the need for trauma-informed survivor care, and the cultural and socio-economic factors that enable exploitation. A partnership model in which survivors, as respected advisors, guide the government not only aligns anti-trafficking strategies with real-world needs but also lays the groundwork for systemic improvements and the genuine empowerment of those who have experienced trafficking.



#### **Tiers**

United States diplomatic posts and domestic agencies reported on the human trafficking situation and governmental action to fight trafficking based on thorough research that included meetings with a wide variety of government officials, local and international NGO representatives, officials of international organizations, journalists, academics, and survivors. The 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report covers government efforts undertaken from April 1, 2024, through March 31, 2025, to the extent concurrent reporting data is available.

#### **Tier Placement**

The Department places each country in this report in one of four categories. This placement is based on the extent of government efforts to meet the TVPA's minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking, which are generally consistent with the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UN TIP Protocol or Palermo Protocol).

While Tier 1 is the highest ranking, it does not mean that a country has no human trafficking problem or that it is doing enough to address the crime. Instead, a Tier 1 ranking indicates that a government has made efforts to address the issue, such as demonstrating appreciable progress each year in combating trafficking, and has met the TVPA's minimum standards.

#### A Guide to the Tiers

Tier 1--Countries whose governments fully meet the TVPA's minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.

Tier 2--Countries whose governments do not fully meet the TVPA's minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.

Tier 2 Watchlist—In the current report, Brazil and South Africa were put on the State Department "watchlist" of countries that show insufficient efforts to combat human trafficking and may face sanctions for the first time, with the department citing failures of both countries to demonstrate progress on the issue, with fewer investigations and prosecutions.

Tier 3--Countries whose governments do not fully meet the TVPA's minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so.

The TVPA also states that any country that has been ranked Tier 2 Watch List for two consecutive years and that would otherwise be ranked Tier 2 Watch List for the next year will instead be ranked Tier 3 in that third year.

#### Funding Restrictions for Tier 3 Countries

Governments on Tier 3 may be subject to certain restrictions on foreign assistance, whereby the President may determine not to provide U.S. government non-humanitarian, non-trade-related foreign aid, as defined in the TVPA. In addition, the President may choose to withhold funding for the participation of government officials or employees in educational and cultural exchange programs in particular Tier 3 countries. Consistent with the TVPA, the President may also determine to instruct the U.S. Executive Director of each multilateral development bank and the International Monetary Fund to vote against and use their best efforts to deny any loans or other uses of the institutions' funds to a designated Tier 3 country for most purposes (except for humanitarian, trade-related, and certain development-related assistance).

Alternatively, the President may waive application of the foregoing restrictions upon a determination that the provision to a Tier 3 country of such assistance would promote the purposes of the TVPA or is otherwise in the national interest of the United States. The TVPA also authorizes the President to waive these restrictions if necessary to avoid significant adverse effects on vulnerable populations, including women and children. Applicable assistance restrictions apply for the next Fiscal Year, which begins October 1, 2025.

## State-Sponsored Trafficking in Persons

The Trafficking in Victims Protection Act (TVPA) Minimum Standards for the Elimination of Trafficking in Persons and the UN TIP Protocol call on governments to proactively address trafficking crimes. Still, some governments are part of the problem.

In 2019, Congress amended the TVPA to acknowledge that governments can also act as human traffickers, referring specifically to a "government policy or pattern" of trafficking; trafficking in government-funded programs; forced labor (in government-affiliated medical services, agriculture, forestry, mining, construction, or other sectors); sexual slavery in government camps, compounds, or outposts; or employing or recruiting child soldiers.

This directly links a government's "policy or pattern" of trafficking to a Tier 3 ranking.

The 2025 TIP Report includes the following 13 countries with a documented "policy or pattern" of human trafficking, trafficking in government-funded programs, forced labor in government-affiliated medical services or other sectors, sexual slavery in government camps, or the employment or recruitment of child soldiers:

Afghanistan--The TIP Report describes the state of human trafficking within a country and with respect to Afghanistan, assesses the actions of Afghan ministries, as well as the Taliban, without implying recognition of the Taliban or another entity as the government of Afghanistan.

Belarus Cuba Russia

Burma Eritrea South Sudan

Cambodia Iran Sudan Korea, Democratic People's

China Republic Of Syria (Assad regime)

#### Tier 1 Placements List

Argentina Estonia Philippines

Australia Finland Poland

Austria France Seychelles

Bahamas, The Georgia Singapore

Bahrain Germany Slovenia

Belgium Guyana Spain

Canada Iceland Suriname

Chile Korea, Republic of Sweden

Cyprus Lithuania Taiwan

Czechia Luxembourg United Kingdom

Denmark Netherlands United States

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#### Tier 2 Placements List

Albania Hungary Norway
Angola India Oman
Antigua and Barbuda Indonesia Pakistan

Antigua and Barbuda Indonesia **Pakistan** Armenia Iraq Palau Aruba Ireland Panama Israel Azerbaijan Paraguay Bangladesh Italy Peru Belize **Jamaica** Portugal

Benin Japan Portugal Bhutan Jordan Qatar Bosnia and Herzegovina Kazakhstan Romania

Botswana Saint Vincent and the

Bulgaria Kosovo Grenadines
Burundi Kuwait Saudi Arabia
Cameroon Latvia Senegal

Central African Republic Lebanon Serbia

Colombia Lesotho Sierra Leone Comoros Madagascar Slovakia Costa Rica Malawi Sri Lanka Côte d'Ivoire Malaysia Switzerland Croatia Mali **Tajikistan** Curação Malta

Dominican Republic Marshall Islands

Ecuador Malta

Tanzania

Thailand

Egypt Mauritius Timor-Leste
El Salvador Mexico Togo

Equatorial Guinea Micronesia, Federated Tonga

Eswatini States of Tonga

Eswatini States of Trinidad and Tobago
Ethiopia Moldova Turkey (Türkiye)

Gabon

Gabon Mongolia Uganda
Gambia, The Montenegro
Ghana Morocco
Ukraine

Greece Mozambique United Arab Emirates

Guatemala Namibia Uruguay
Guinea New Zealand Uzbekistan
Guinea-Bissau Nigeria Vietnam

Honduras North Macedonia Zambia

#### Tier 2 Watch List

Algeria Congo, Republic of Rwanda

Barbados Djibouti Saint Lucia

Bolivia Fiji Solomon Islands

Brazil Hong Kong S.A.R. South Africa

Brunei Kyrgyzstan

Burkina Faso Liberia

Cabo Verde Maldives Turkmenistan

Congo, Democratic Nepal Vanuatu

Republic of the Niger Zimbabwe

#### Tier 3 Placement List

Afghanistan Eritrea Papua New Guinea

Belarus Iran Russia

Burma Korea, Democratic Sint Maarten

Cambodia Republic of South Sudan

Chad Laos Sudan

China Macau S.A.R. Syria

Cuba Nicaragua Venezuela

#### Taiwan and Indonesia

Since the TIP report was released there has been some questions on the <u>ranking</u> of both Taiwan and Indonesia. It is widely known that both



Tunisia

countries are known to use labor trafficking in the seafood industry. Taiwan has one of the world's largest industrial fishing fleets, while Indonesia citizens make up a large portion of the crew on the Taiwanese ships.

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#### The United States

While the United States placed itself in Tier One, the report did acknowledge some shortcomings as stated: "Although the government meets the minimum standards, in some cases victims continued to be arrested for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked, and trafficking survivors with criminal records resulting from their trafficking faced ongoing barriers to employment, housing, education, and other essential needs for safety and recovery. There was a decrease in federal human trafficking prosecutions and a significant decrease in federal convictions of human traffickers. Support for victim services remained inadequate, as did the availability of affordable, safe, and stable housing options for survivors. The government continued not to mandate human trafficking screening for all individuals in immigration detention or custody."

There was no mention in the report on the impact of cutting the State Department office that works on human trafficking by 70 percent, the failure to reauthorize the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, nor the increased risk for trafficking of immigrants in the United States. Also, although one of the issues raised included forced criminality and victims prosecuted for crimes they are forced to commit by their trafficker, there is no mention of the failure to enact vacatur laws.





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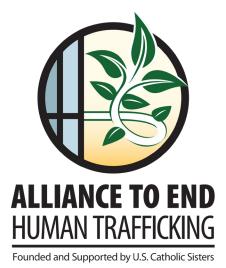
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