



NGO: EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR LAW AND JUSTICE (ECLJ)

**UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW
50TH SESSION**

**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF PANAMA
FOR THE 50TH SESSION OF THE
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

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Introduction

1. The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Republic of Panama (Panama) for the 50th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

Background

2. Panama is a country located in Central America and has a population of approximately 4.3 million people.¹ The population is predominantly Christian, with approximately 48.6% of the population identifying as Catholic, 30.2% as Evangelical, 4.7% as agnostic, and 12.3% belonging to no religion.²

3. Panama's last review was held on November 3, 2020.³ As a result of the review, Panama received 181 recommendations, 146 of which it supported.⁴ It was recommended by Nepal, and supported by Panama, that the government “[c]ontinue strengthening its efforts to combat trafficking in persons and protecting the rights of victims.”⁵ No recommendations were made regarding religious freedom.

Legal Framework

4. Under Article 456-A of the Penal Code of Panama:

Whoever promotes, directs, organizes, finances, advertises, invites or manages by any means of mass or individual communication or otherwise facilitates the entry or exit of the country or the movement within the national territory of a person of any sex, to perform one or more acts of prostitution or to subject them to exploitation, sexual or labor bondage, slavery or practices similar to slavery, forced labor or services, servile marriage, begging, unlawful extraction of organs or irregular adoption shall be sanctioned With imprisonment of fifteen to twenty years. The penalty will be twenty to thirty years imprisonment, when:

1. The victim is a person under age or is in a situation of vulnerability or disability or unable to consent.

¹ Gustavo Anguizola et al., *Panama*, BRITANNICA (Mar. 27, 2025), <https://www.britannica.com/place/Panama>.

² *Panama Religions*, INDEX MUNDI (Sept. 18, 2021), <https://www.indexmundi.com/panama/religions.html>.

³ *Universal Periodic Review – Panama*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/pa-index> (last visited Mar. 28, 2025).

⁴ *Panama – Infographic*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session36/PA/infographic-PANAMA.pdf>.

⁵ OHCHR, UPR of Panama (3rd Cycle – 36th Session) Thematic List of Recommendations, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session36/PA/UPR36_Panama_Thematic_List_of_Recommendations.docx.

2. The victim is used in acts of exhibitionism through photographic means, camcorders or obscene recordings.

3. The act is executed through deceit, coercion, violence, threat, fraud, abduction or retention of passports, migratory documents or personal identification.

4. The act is committed by a close relative, guardian or whoever is in charge of the custody, upbringing, education or instruction of the victim.

5. The act is committed by a public servant.⁶

5. Additionally, Article 8 of the ICCPR states that “[n]o one shall be held in slavery; slavery and the slave-trade in all their forms shall be prohibited. No one shall be held in servitude.”⁷

6. Panama is also a party to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.⁸ Under Article 9 sec. 1 of this Protocol:

1. States Parties shall establish comprehensive policies, programmes and other measures:

(a) To prevent and combat trafficking in persons; and

(b) To protect victims of trafficking in persons, especially women and children, from revictimization.⁹

Human Trafficking

7. Panama primarily serves as a destination country for human trafficking.¹⁰ The predominating forms of human trafficking that exist in Panama are sex trafficking and forced labor.¹¹ Often traffickers target people from vulnerable groups such as women, migrants, and indigenous people.¹² Traffickers use deception to lure their victims through false promises of

⁶ PENAL CODE OF PANAMA art. 456-A, <https://antislaverylaw.ac.uk/country/panama/?dataset=adld>.

⁷ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 8, Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights> [hereinafter ICCPR].

⁸ *Chapter XVIII Penal Matters: 12. A Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, UNITED NATIONS TREATY COLLECTION (Nov. 15, 2000), https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XVIII-12-a&chapter=18.

⁹ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime art. 9 § 1, Nov. 15, 2000, G.A. Res. 55/25, U.N. Doc. A/RES/55/25, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>.

¹⁰ *Panama*, GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX, <https://ocindex.net/country/panama> (last visited Mar. 28, 2025).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

good paying jobs.¹³ A 2023 report found that there are an estimated 20,000 people living in modern slavery in Panama.¹⁴ Despite these high numbers, between 2020 and 2022, the government only identified forty-eight victims of human trafficking.¹⁵ In 2023, the government stepped up its efforts in conducting anti-human trafficking operations. Across four different anti-human trafficking operations conducted that year, authorities were able to rescue forty-one potential victims of human trafficking and arrested thirteen suspected human traffickers.¹⁶

8. Below we have highlighted some human trafficking cases in Panama since its last UPR.

9. In January 2025, the National Border Service and the Public Prosecutor's Office conducted Operation Darién which resulted in the rescue of twenty-two individuals.¹⁷ The operation was conducted after one victim escaped and reported the crime to police.¹⁸ The victims rescued were of Pakistani, Iranian, Vietnamese, and Indian descent.¹⁹

10. In December 2023, the National Police, the National Migration Service, and the Organized Crime Prosecutor's Office of the Public Ministry were able to rescue fourteen women who were victims of human trafficking.²⁰ The women were from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Columbia.²¹

11. That same month, authorities raided an apartment and arrested three Ecuadorians for the role in human trafficking.²² In addition to the arrests, authorities also rescued three victims.²³

12. On January 24, 2023, authorities conducted Operation Horizonte in Barú and Chiriquí.²⁴ The operation resulted in the arrests of five individuals who were involved in sex trafficking and sexual abuse of minors.²⁵

¹³ *IOM Applauds the Fight Against the "Latent" Problem of Trafficking in Panama*, MI DIARIO (July 30, 2021, 8:47 PM), <https://www.midiario.com/nacionales/la-oim-aplaude-el-combate-del-problema-latente-de-la-trata-en-panama/>.

¹⁴ *Modern Slavery in Panama*, WALK FREE (2023),

<https://cdn.walkfree.org/content/uploads/2023/09/28135323/GSI-Snapshot-Panama.pdf>.

¹⁵ UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 21* (2024), https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/NorthAmerica_CentralAmerica_Caribbean_GLOTIP2024.pdf.

¹⁶ Jairo Cornejo, *Anti-Trafficking Operations in 2023: 41 Victims Rescued*, MI DIARIO (Jan. 1, 2024, 12:00 PM), <https://www.midiario.com/policiales/operaciones-contra-la-trata-de-personas-en-2023-rescatadas-41-victimas/>.

¹⁷ Carlos Avila Rivas, *Drama in Darién: 22 Migrants Detained Against Their Will Are Rescued*, MI DIARIO (Jan. 16, 2025, 11:23 AM), <https://www.midiario.com/policiales/drama-en-darien-rescatan-a-22-migrantes-retenidos-contra-su-voluntad/>.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ Jairo Cornejo, *Operation "Rufián" Dismantles Human Trafficking Network in Panama: 14 Women Rescued*, MI DIARIO (Dec. 23, 2023, 10:00 AM), <https://www.midiario.com/policiales/operacion-rufian-desarticula-red-de-trata-de-personas-en-panama-14-mujeres-rescatadas/>.

²¹ *Id.*

²² Emily Sánchez, *Police Operation Rescues Victims of Human Trafficking and Arrests Three Ecuadorian Citizens*, MI DIARIO (Dec. 10, 2023, 1:35 PM), <https://www.midiario.com/policiales/operativo-policial-rescata-victimas-de-trata-de-personas-y-detiene-a-tres-ciudadanos-ecuatorianos/>.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Carlos Ávila Rivas, *Crime Against Humanity in the Form of Human Trafficking is Increasing*, MI DIARIO (Jan. 24, 2023, 1:12 PM), <https://www.midiario.com/nacionales/en-aumento-el-delito-contra-la-humanidad-en-la-modalidad-de-trata-de-personas/>.

²⁵ *Id.*

13. On January 17, 2023, authorities dismantled a criminal organization that was involved in labor trafficking.²⁶ Authorities rescued twenty-two individuals, eight of whom were minors. Additionally, authorities arrested six individuals for human trafficking.²⁷

14. In February 2022, authorities in Panama rescued ten children and arrested three individuals for human trafficking.²⁸ The children were trafficked from Panama to Costa Rica to be sexually exploited.²⁹

15. These few stories illustrate the conditions that human trafficking victims are subjected to and stress the importance of taking action. Unfortunately, Panama has not been adequately protecting victims of human trafficking and ensuring that they get the proper aid and support they need.³⁰ Only recently, in December 2024, the government enacted Law 458, which among other things, provides comprehensive care, focuses on social reintegration, and creates a mechanism for the victims to obtain compensation.³¹ Proper implementation of this law is critical to ensure that Panama lives up to its obligation under the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.³²

Recommendations

16. Panama must do more to identify and protect victims of human trafficking as it is estimated that thousands of victims go undetected. The government must take immediate action to identify victims of human trafficking so that they are rescued, and their perpetrators are brought to justice. Additionally, because there are so many incidents of individuals being trafficked out of the country, the government must commit to enforcing the border to stop traffickers at the border before they can leave the country with their victims. Further, we are encouraged by Panama's recent legislative measure to provide aid and support for the victims, which is a crucial step to allowing victims to reintegrate into society. We hope that this new measure will be well supported and properly implemented so that victims can get the help that they need.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *10 Children Rescued in Panama Sex Trafficking Operation*, INQUIRER (Feb. 4, 2022, 1:31 PM), <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1549941/10-children-rescued-in-panama-sex-trafficking-operation>.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Panama*, *supra* note 10.

³¹ *Panama Strengthens its Fight Against Human Trafficking with the Approval of Law 458 on December 3, 2024*, UNODC (Dec. 11, 2024), https://www.unodc.org/ropan/es/Noticias/2024_11diciembre_panama_trata_ley.html.

³² Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime art. 9 § 1.