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**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF TIMOR-LESTE
FOR THE 54TH SESSION OF THE
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) was founded in 1998 and is a 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 Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (Timor- Leste) for the 54th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

www.ECLJ.org
4, quai Koch
67000 Strasbourg, France
Phone: +33 (0)3.88.24.94.40

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Background

1. Timor-Leste is an island country located in the Malay Archipelago and has a population of approximately 1.5 million people.¹ The population is predominantly Christian, with approximately 97.5% of the population identifying as Catholic, 2% as Protestant, and 0.5% as other.²

2. Timor-Leste's last review was held on January 27, 2022.³ As a result of the review, Timor-Leste received 194 recommendations, 186 of which it accepted.⁴ It was recommended by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and supported by Timor-Leste, that the government "[p]rovide adequate training and resources for all relevant front-line officials so they can effectively identify victims of human trafficking and offer victims appropriate assistance."⁵ In our last report, we also expressed concern over the problem of human trafficking. No recommendations were made regarding religious freedom.

Legal Framework

3. Article 50 of the Constitution of Timor-Leste states that:

1. Every citizen, regardless of gender, has the right and the duty to work and to choose freely his or her profession.
2. The worker has the right to labor safety and hygiene, remuneration, rest and vacation.
3. Dismissal without just cause or on political, religious and ideological grounds is prohibited.
4. Compulsory work, without prejudice to the cases provided for under penal legislation, is prohibited.⁶

4. Under Article 2 of the Law on Prevention and Fight Against Trafficking in Persons:

...trafficking in persons means the recruitment, transportation, transfer, delivery, acceptance, accommodation or reception of persons through threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, kidnapping, fraud, deception, abuse of authority or a position of vulnerability, or the surrender or acceptance payments or benefits to obtain consent from one person who has authority over another for the purposes of exploitation, including at least the exploitation of prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced marriage, exploitation of that person's work or services, the forced labor or debt bondage, begging, slavery, the removal of organs or the exploitation of other criminal activities or use in armed conflicts or civil uprising.⁷

5. Additionally, under Article 163 of the Penal Code of Timor-Leste:

Any person who recruits, assigns, purchases, transports, transfers, houses or receives persons, through use of threats, force or other forms of coercion, kidnapping, fraud, trickery, abuse of power or situation of vulnerability, or by means of delivery or acceptance of payments or benefits, to obtain the consent of a person with authority over another, for purposes of exploitation, shall be punishable with 8 to 20 years imprisonment.⁸

6. Timor-Leste is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).⁹ Under Article 8 of the ICCPR, “[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.”¹⁰

7. Timor-Leste 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.¹¹ Under Article 9, section 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.¹²

Human Trafficking

8. In our previous report on Timor-Leste during the last UPR cycle, we commended the government for creating a National Action Plan to combat human trafficking. Unfortunately, the implementation of that plan was done poorly, and its objectives were not accomplished for the reasons discussed below.

9. In our previous report, we pointed out that Timor-Leste needed to improve its ability to identify victims and provide aid to victims of human trafficking. Identifying and aiding victims are crucial in combating human trafficking and allow authorities to work with the victims to ensure that the perpetrators are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

10. Since the last UPR cycle, Timor-Leste has been experiencing a rise in trafficking of both men and women seeking economic stability.¹³ While human trafficking is done both domestically and internationally, international human trafficking is much more prevalent and represents approximately two-thirds of human trafficking victims in Timor-Leste.¹⁴

11. Domestically, victims are trafficked to city centers and exploited for forced labor in construction and agriculture, while female victims are sexually exploited or forced into domestic service. Internationally, victims are trafficked to Southeast Asia, Europe, or the Middle East.¹⁵ For example, in 2024, authorities reported that, of the sixty-eight Timorese victims that were trafficked, most were trafficked to Malaysia, while fourteen women were trafficked to Slovakia. As we have repeatedly seen, the perpetrators use false job postings online to lure their victims.¹⁶

12. The tactics of human traffickers remain the same, regardless of whether the victims are trafficked domestically or internationally. The perpetrators target individuals who are often poor, lack education, and have limited job prospects. They then lure their victims with false promises of good paying jobs elsewhere. However, once the victims agree, they are met with a dark reality. The traffickers take the victims' passports or government identity documents and force them to work for little or no compensation.¹⁷ It is also common for the traffickers to beat and threaten their victims if they try to leave. Between 2020 and 2024, authorities identified forty-one cases of human trafficking involving 107 victims.¹⁸ Unfortunately, it is estimated that there were as many as 5,000 Timorese victims of human trafficking between 2020 and 2024.¹⁹ This means that as many as 4,900 victims are still trapped. In 2023-2024 alone, authorities identified eleven cases of human trafficking, involving sixty-one victims, thirty-six of which were Timorese citizens.²⁰ Although the sheer number of remaining victims is discouraging, the 2025 statistics show a remarkable increase in identified cases and victims.

13. There are numerous factors contributing to Timor-Leste's lack of ability to combat human trafficking effectively. While Timor-Leste has a dedicated anti-human trafficking unit, authorities still lack the resources to prevent and detect cases of human trafficking and provide limited victim support services.²¹ In order to provide victims with support, the government heavily relies on NGOs to provide victims with shelter, aid, and counseling.²²

14. To help address human trafficking, in 2022, the government adopted a National Action Plan for 2022-2026, which, as stated above, we commended in our last report.²³ Unfortunately, the plan was poorly implemented due to a lack of funding, a lack of research, and a lack of willingness by the government to take human trafficking seriously.²⁴ The lack of resources, research, and willingness to combat human trafficking has left authorities unprepared and without the tools needed to identify victims (and investigate cases) of human trafficking. At the conclusion of the National Action Plan in 2026, the government enacted a second National Action Plan for 2026-2030. While the goals of new national action plan are the same as the previous one, the new action plan does seek to address the failures of the previous one. It does this by prioritizing victim assistance, ensuring effective prosecution, and strengthening the collection of human trafficking data.

15. The newly implemented action plan provides a guideline to combat human trafficking through identifying timelines, responsible actors, objectives, and activities. Further, it uses a four-prong approach of prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership to address human trafficking. For prevention, the plan calls for an increase in public awareness campaigns to educate the population on human trafficking. For protection, the plan calls for the government to provide support for victims of human trafficking and aid in their recovery and return to society. For prosecution, the plan calls for the authorities to effectively detect, screen, investigate, and prosecute cases of human trafficking. This is very important given the large discrepancy between identified cases of human trafficking and the number of potential victims. Finally, the plan calls for the government to partner with other countries to coordinate efforts to combat human trafficking.²⁵

Recommendations

16. Unfortunately, the recommendations made during the previous UPR cycle have not been implemented as we would have hoped. The number of individuals trafficked out of Timor-Leste has not decreased as it should, with only 107 victims out of approximately 5000 trafficked between 2020-2024, something that needs to change fast.²⁶ With the adoption of the

2026-2030 National Action Plan, the nation needs to commit itself to the plan it has laid out.²⁷ Timor-Leste needs to strengthen its border security and improving its ability to detect and stop trafficking. Timor-Leste needs to increase awareness of trafficking by working with the UN and NGOs alike to educate its citizens about the reality of trafficking and the deceptive tactics used to lure people in. Timor-Leste also needs to increase its law enforcement presence throughout the nation to not only stop trafficking before it starts but protect those who were freed and trying to rebuild their life.

17. The government must allocate the necessary resources to investigate and prosecute all cases of human trafficking and provide aid and resources to the victims. Timor-Leste must increase human trafficking investigations and thoroughly prosecute all perpetrators. Further, the authorities must work to identify and rescue the thousands of victims mentioned above. Additionally, we ask that Timor-Leste immediately involve the NGOs that are already providing aid and resources to victims in the National Action Plan, as they will have firsthand information, not only on what aid and resources victims need, but also on how to effectively implement the guidelines of the new plan, including identification and prosecution.

¹ *East Timor*, BRITANNICA, <https://www.britannica.com/place/East-Timor>.

² *Id.*

³ *Universal Periodic Review – Timor-Leste*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/tl-index>.

⁴ *Infographic-Timor Leste*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/upr/sessions/session40/tl/2022-12-23/Timor-Leste.pdf>.

⁵ OHCHR, UPR of Timor-Leste (3rd Cycle – 40th Session) Thematic List of Recommendations, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/upr/sessions/session40/tl/2022-09-20/UPR40_Timor-Leste_Thematic_List_of_Recommendations.doc.

⁶ CONSTITUTION OF TIMOR-LESTE 2002 art. 50, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/East_Timor_2002.

⁷ LAW ON PREVENTION AND FIGHT AGAINST TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS 2017 art. 2, <https://antislaverylaw.ac.uk/country/timor-leste/?dataset=adld>.

⁸ DECREE LAW NO. 19/2009.

⁹ *Ratification Status for Timor-Leste*, OHCHR, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/treaty.aspx.

¹⁰ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 8, *adopted* 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].

¹¹ *Status of Treaties: 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, https://treaties.un.org/pages/viewdetails.aspx?src=ind&mtdsg_no=xviii-12-a&chapter=18.

¹² G.A. Res 55/25, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children art. 9 § 1 (Nov. 15, 2000), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>.

¹³ *Human Trafficking in Timor-Leste: A Serious and Growing Problem*, FUNDASAUN MAHEIN (Jan. 16, 2024), <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2024/01/16/human-trafficking-in-timor-leste-a-serious-and-growing-problem/>.

¹⁴ *Unified, Concerted Efforts Against Human Trafficking are Imperative*, UN (July 28, 2023), <https://timorleste.un.org/en/240396-unified-concerted-efforts-against-human-trafficking-are-imperative>.

¹⁵ *Timor-Leste*, GLOBAL ORGANIZED INDEX, <https://ocindex.net/country/timor-leste>.

¹⁶ *68 Timorese Trafficked to Work in Malaysia, Cambodia, China and Saudi Arabia*, TATOLI (May 22, 2025), <https://en.tatoli.tl/2025/05/22/68-timorese-trafficked-to-work-in-malaysia-cambodia-china-and-saudi-arabia/11/>.

¹⁷ *Unified, Concerted Efforts Against Human Trafficking are Imperative*, *supra* note 14.

¹⁸ *National Action Plan to Prevent and Counter Trafficking in Persons*, UN WOMAN,
https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/tl-20250416976-english_nap-tip_tl_18aug2025.pdf.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Human Trafficking in Timor-Leste: A Serious and Growing Problem*, *supra* note 13.

²² *Timor-Leste*, *supra* note 15.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *National Action Plan to Prevent and Counter Trafficking in Persons 2026-2030*, *supra* note 18.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*