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The Third International Conference in Central Asia

Strengthening National and International Partnerships in Combating Trafficking in Persons

Astana, Kazakhstan, July 27-28, 2023

Report



INTERNATIONAL CTIP CONFERENCE IN ASTANA, JULY 2023



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Executive Summary

The Third International Conference “Strengthening National and International Partnerships in Combating Trafficking in Persons” (Third conference) was organized in Astana, Kazakhstan on 27-28 July 2023 by the Law Enforcement Academy under the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Winrock International with financial support of the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and the United States Agency for International Development.

THE THIRD CONFERENCE WAS ARRANGED IN THEMATIC SESSIONS

1. High-level panel session on priorities to suppress and disrupt trafficking in persons in 2023–2024

The high-level officials set the strategic tone of the conference as they charted a course of action to build strong partnerships among national government agencies, civil society organizations and the private sector.

Key takeaways: Ensuring victim-centered and multidisciplinary approach based on 4Ps and making victims voices heard.

2. Keynote address: “Reach every victim of trafficking, leave no one behind”

Ms. Mariana Meshi, an Albanian expert on countering trafficking in persons, shared Albania’s experience on introducing victim-centered approaches into the national counter-trafficking system, which was followed by pre-recorded video messages of Mr. Ulan Nogoibaev, the Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons and the Deputy Head of the Secretariat of the Migration Council under the Speaker of the Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic, Mr. Abdurakhmon Alamsho Alamshozoda, the Chairperson of the Commission for Combating Trafficking in Persons, First Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, Lieutenant General, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, and Ms. Tanzila Narbayeva, the Chairperson of the National Commission on Combating Trafficking in Persons and Forced Labor of the Republic of Uzbekistan. on the practices of their respective countries.

Key takeaways: Tackling trafficking in persons requires strong political will and commitment together with consistent approach. There is a need for a unified regional response to trafficking and developing a regional action plan for Central Asia.

3. Panel session: Investigated and prosecuted trafficking in persons cases in 2022–2023

Experts of five Central Asian countries provided an overview of revealed trafficking in persons crimes and criminal statistics related to investigations and prosecutions. The session also facilitated the exchange of promising practices in investigating and prosecuting trafficking in persons and related cases.

Key takeaways: High latency of crime complicates detection. Prosecution is negatively impacted by difficulties with qualifying and proving the offence, as well as lack of willingness of victims to participate in proceedings to testify against traffickers. States must ensure proper national referral mechanisms by involving all key sectors, including education, healthcare, law enforcement and judiciary, not leaving any victim unnoticed. Central Asian countries should agree on clear protocols, procedures and channels to expedite actions needed for investigations, evidence collection and police operations.

4. Panel session: Profile of identified victims in 2022–2023

Representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGO) from all Central Asian countries discussed the profile of victims of trafficking in 2022–2023 in Central Asia including their age, gender, country of origin, vulnerability factors and psychological effects suffered. The session also included a personal story from an expert in trafficking in persons with lived experience. The interventions addressed the realities of trafficking and underscored the importance of improving identification and assistance processes.

Key takeaways: Challenging analysis of victim profile because of absence of unified and consistent database and set of indicators, lack of understanding what identification is and lack of awareness about NGOs available to assist victims and shelters. Media should be more active in countering trafficking in persons. There is a need to apply the “Do not harm” principle, address stereotypes, and raise awareness of children and youth. There is a need for an e-library on trafficking in persons in Central Asia.

5. Panel session: Follow-up on the implementation of the Bukhara Declaration

The session assessed the implementation of anti-trafficking measures enshrined in the Bukhara Declaration.

Key takeaways: There is a need to further develop transnational referral mechanisms, to allot more resources and to increase expertise to tackle online exploitation, as well as to harmonize the interagency approach in responding to trafficking in persons in the Central Asian region. Court practices on admissibility of evidence should be analyzed, and more efforts should be taken to ensure that the criminal cases reach courts. The non-punishment principle for offences committed by victims of trafficking should be applied.

6. Panel session: International support in combating trafficking in persons in Central Asia

International community discussed their support in combating trafficking in persons in Central Asia, including types of support that international organizations provide, best practices and lessons learned.

Key takeaways: More efforts are needed to engage and involve the private sector, including logistics, hospitality and aviation companies.

7. Panel session: Role of border guards, migration services, customs in the field of detection of trafficking in persons crimes and identification and referral of victims at the state borders

The session dealt with the role of border guards, migration authorities, customs in the field of detection of trafficking in persons crimes and identification and referral of victims of trafficking at the state borders, as well as provided an

overview on trafficking in persons crimes detected at the state borders including the recent challenges and best practices.

Key takeaways: Identification of trafficking victims and detection of trafficking in persons crimes require specialized knowledge and skills considering the constantly changing modus operandi of the crimes. Increased flows of persons and vehicles through the state borders creates additional challenges for the front-line officers working at the borders and requires taking timely and effective measures to respond to urging threats, such as trafficking in persons.

8. Group work session: Response to contemporary threats through strengthening partnerships

The Third Conference included a group work session on responding to contemporary threats by strengthening partnerships and developing new strategies for effective collaboration related to the objectives of the theme of the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons in 2023: improving victim identification and support, trafficking prevention and ways of ending impunity. Through case studies, each group developed a plan of action to strengthen partnerships, based on their competence and identified potential partners.





Introduction

The first “Strengthening National and International Partnerships in Combating Trafficking in Persons” Conference took place in Bukhara, Uzbekistan in November 2021 (Bukhara Conference). During the Bukhara Conference, the delegates emphasized the need for greater regional cooperation to address trafficking in persons challenges more effectively and called for action in the Bukhara Declaration on Strengthening Partnerships in Countering Trafficking in Persons (Bukhara Declaration).

One of the initiatives defined in the Bukhara Declaration was to address disturbing trends of the Central Asian region with the engagement of key stakeholders including law enforcement and civil society organizations of Central Asian countries in joint events at the end of July to mark the World Day against Trafficking in Persons. As foreseen in the Bukhara Declaration, the cycle of the annual international conferences continued in Uzbekistan in 2022, in cooperation with the National Commission on Combating Trafficking in Persons and Forced Labor of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and in Kazakhstan in 2023. Subsequent iterations of the conferences should be held in Kyrgyzstan in 2024, Tajikistan in 2025 and Turkmenistan in 2026.

The most marked trend across the entire Central Asian region throughout 2017–2020 was the decline in registered trafficking in persons cases and convictions and a sharp decrease in investigations, prosecutions, and convictions in 2020. During the same year, the number of recorded victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation drastically dropped. This drop suggested that trafficking in persons crimes went further underground, hampering victim identification and referral for further vital assistance. Women and girls accounted for the largest share of the identified victims in Central Asia: 48% of the victims were women and 16% girls, compared to 29% men and 7% boys in 2020. In the same year, sexual exploitation was a dominant form of trafficking in persons, with 76% of detected victims trafficked for sexual exploitation purposes and victims of trafficking for labor exploitation constituting only 15% of the total of identified victims.

In accordance with the 2023 theme of the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons – “Reach every victim of trafficking, leave no one behind” – the Third Conference served as an advocacy instrument drawing attention of stakeholders to the urgent need to address the root causes of trafficking in persons such as poverty, inequality, discrimination and lack of access to education, healthcare and employment. It promoted measures necessary for systematic, coherent and consistent suppression of trafficking in persons and reinforced partnerships by bringing together all key state and non-state stakeholders of the region.

High-level panel session on priorities to suppress and disrupt trafficking in persons in 2023–2024

Ms. Ashita Mittal, UNODC Regional Representative to Central Asia, moderated the high-level panel session dedicated to the discussion of corporate priorities to suppress and disrupt trafficking in persons in 2023–2024. The session brought together Mr. Seitenov Kaliolla Kabayevich, Acting Rector of the Law Enforcement Academy under the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Mr. Rodney Ferguson, President and CEO of Winrock International, and the Honourable Daniel Rosenblum Ambassador of the United States to the Republic of Kazakhstan.. A video address from Mr. John Brandolino, Director of the Division for Treaty Affairs at UNODC was also screened.

Mr. Kaliolla Kabayevich presented the state strategy against trafficking in persons, based on the “4Ps”. He indicated that the state plan against trafficking in persons includes a wide range of initiatives treating the protection of victims of trafficking as the first priority. He noted that more than 100 cases of trafficking crimes are registered annually in the country and 110 crimes

were recorded since the beginning of this 2023. A draft law “On Combating Trafficking in Persons” was developed by the Interdepartmental Working Group under the coordination of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which is under consideration in the Majilis of the Parliament. “Today’s conference is proof of the potential of cooperation, and only through collective efforts, we can really make a difference. Together we can create a safer world where no one is exposed to the horrors of trafficking and where every nation joins forces to protect the most vulnerable among us,” he concluded.

Mr. Brandolino emphasized the role of the Bukhara Declaration implementation of which contributes to the promotion of regional cooperation against trafficking in persons and reiterated UNODC’s commitment to rendering technical assistance in facilitating partnerships, in particular among judiciary, law enforcement and civil society to put an end to trafficking. He noted the global decrease in the number of identified victims, as well as conducted investigations and prosecutions. Additionally, Mr. Brandolino paid special attention to the gender dimension of trafficking, indicating that women and girls constituted the vast majority of identified victims. Finally, he mentioned that through the Global Programme against Trafficking in Persons, UNODC planned to place an additional international mentor on anti-trafficking matters at the UNODC’s Regional Office to increase the organization’s capacity to offer technical advice and support.

Mr. Ferguson expressed appreciation to all Central Asian states for active involvement in the annual conferences, as well as overall cooperation in combating trafficking in persons. Through working with community-based organizations and engaging with survivors, over 9,000 victims benefited from Winrock International’s comprehensive support, including legal, psychological and employment assistance. The SMICA activities, implemented by Winrock International, aim to strengthen the mutual accountability of governments, NGOs, and the private sector in the efforts to prevent trafficking in persons, protect survivors of trafficking and promote safe migration, he said.

The Honorable Daniel Rosenblum, Ambassador of the United States to the Republic of Kazakhstan, welcomed participants and emphasized that combating trafficking in persons is a priority area of foreign policy of the United States, which is based on prevention, prosecution and protection, as well as partnership. He highlighted the United States’ support for anti-trafficking programs in Kazakhstan since 2001 and pointed out Kazakhstan’s draft standalone law “On Combating Trafficking in Persons” as a truly inspiring example of multidisciplinary partnership. Also, he voiced hope that the regional UNODC initiative started in Bukhara will sustain the growing momentum for regional cooperation in improving criminal justice responses to trafficking in persons.

Keynote address: Reach every victim of trafficking, leave no one behind

Ms. Ellie Valentine, the SMICA Chief of Party Winrock International, facilitated the session dedicated to sharing promising practices of applying the victim-centered approach into the national counter-trafficking systems.

Ms. Valentine reminded of the 2023 World Day Against Trafficking theme – “Reach every victim of trafficking, leave no one behind” – and shared a successful story of a study visit of representatives of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to Albania, arranged in partnership with Different & Equal Nonprofit Organization, dedicated to providing high quality reintegration services for victims of trafficking.

Ms. Mariana Meshi, an international expert on countering trafficking in persons and Executive Director of Different & Equal, joined the session as a keynote speaker to share her work experience in Albania. The main body for anti-trafficking actions in Albania is the national anti-trafficking coordinator. The coordinator is responsible for designing and developing national action plans, as well as monitoring their implementation. There is also the State Committee for the Fight against Trafficking in Human Beings that ensures the coordinated political will for implementing anti-trafficking strategies and actions in Albania.

Anti-trafficking actions at the local level are coordinated by regional anti-trafficking committees linked to prefectures. Albania also has a unique coalition of anti-trafficking shelters composed of NGOs and shelters supported by the government. NGOs have developed unified Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) on Transnational Referral Mechanisms between Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro. The National Referral Mechanism Agreement stipulates coordination of identification, referral and protection of victims of trafficking among governmental and non-governmental actors. Members of the National Referral Mechanism are the Ministries of Internal Affairs, of Foreign Affairs, of Education, of Health, of Justice and of Finance, the Prosecutor General’s Office and local NGO. Based on the SOP, Albania developed a database with statistics on victims and potential victims of trafficking in persons.

The Responsible Authority is the structure that closely coordinates and monitors the identification and referral procedures related to assistance, protection, reintegration of victims and potential victims of trafficking, as well as the registration and periodic reporting of statistics on trafficking in persons. The members of the Responsible Authority are the Ministries of Health, of Foreign Affairs and of Internal Affairs, as well as the Police Directorate General. Albania develops national action plans against trafficking in persons every three years. The latest national action plan is for the period 2021–2023. It is the most important political and strategic document against trafficking in persons covering protection, prevention, prosecution and addressing the recommendations of the Trafficking in Persons Reports issued by the U.S. Department of State.

The session also broadcasted pre-recorded video messages from three relevant officials who spoke to the theme of the conference

Firstly, Mr. Ulan Nogoibaev, the Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons and the Deputy Head of the Secretariat of the Migration Council under the Speaker of the Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic, stated that the recent geopolitical and economic turbulence had influenced the increase of crimes, including trafficking in persons. The main message of Mr. Ulan was to urge everyone to cooperate and have a unified response to trafficking in persons.

Next, Mr. Abdurakhmon Alamsho Alamshozoda, the Chairperson of the Commission for Combating Trafficking in Persons, First Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, Lieutenant General, Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, noted that Tajikistan actively had been addressing trafficking in persons crimes and it was the first country in the region to adopt a law on combating trafficking in persons. He reiterated Tajikistan's commitment and readiness to collaborate with other countries to fight against these crimes and to learn from other states.

Finally, Ms. Tanzila Narbaeva, the Chairperson of the National Commission on Combating Trafficking in Persons and Forced Labor of the Republic of Uzbekistan, thanked UNODC and Winrock International for supporting Uzbekistan in taking very active and important steps in countering trafficking in persons. She emphasized that Uzbekistan had been strengthening institutional foundations for anti-trafficking initiatives based on international obligations including the development of the National Referral Mechanism, improving rehabilitation centers and their facilities in regions and paying specific attention to women and children. Furthermore, Ms. Narbaeva put forward the idea of adopting a regional program on promoting safe migration with the help of international organizations.

Panel session: Investigated and prosecuted trafficking in persons cases in 2022–2023

Dr. Reda Sirgediene, the UNODC Regional Adviser for Central Asia on Countering Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants, introduced to the conference participants the key points for discussion at the panel session including the main trends of trafficking in persons in the region, emphasizing the crucial role of law enforcement and the judiciary in disrupting criminal networks, decreasing the rate of trafficking in persons crimes, as well as identifying and referring victims of trafficking to necessary protection and support services. The panel session included five Central Asian countries, represented by the relevant department heads of each state.

Furthermore, Dr. Sirgediene noted that the UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons shows that the Central Asian context is very similar to the global status of counter-trafficking work – there are many trafficking in persons investigations ongoing in the region but they

are mostly related to sexual and labor exploitation. The Central Asian states are mostly countries of origin and transit for trafficking in persons, except the Republic of Kazakhstan, which is considered to be not only country of origin and transit, but also destination. According to the casework from 2022–2023, the main destination countries for victims from the region were the Republic of Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, India, the Russian Federation, Thailand and Saudi Arabia.. Dr. Sirgediene emphasized that the annual conferences are an excellent platform to discuss the context and share data to see the full picture of trafficking in persons in the region and look for solutions to overcome the barriers hindering successful investigation of trafficking in persons crimes.

Republic of Kazakhstan

Mr. Samat Kusetov, Head of the Department for Combating Trafficking in Persons, Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, stressed that exploitation and trafficking in persons constitute a great concern for the global community. He noted that countering trafficking in persons includes prevention of crimes, protection of victims, and adjudication of criminal cases. Therefore, he highlighted the importance of strengthening the collaboration between the state agencies and civil society, based on mutual support and cooperation. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan carries out systematic preventive and practical work aimed at revealing and putting an end to sexual and labor exploitation, sale of newborn children for the purpose of adoption, trafficking in human organs and forced begging. A total of 110 crimes related to trafficking in persons were registered in the Republic of Kazakhstan within the first six month of 2023, among them: trafficking in persons – 24 cases, including 16 cases related to minors; unlawful deprivation of liberty for the purpose of exploitation – five cases; enticement into prostitution – 14, including seven cases related to minors; pimping and running a brothel – 67 cases.

Ministry of Internal Affairs: Annual Case Statistics

Year	Number of investigated trafficking in persons and related crimes	Number of disrupted organized criminal groups
2020	111	1
2021	103	3
2022	77	5
First six months of 2023	110	-

In 2021, the Ministry of Internal Affairs eliminated a transnational organized criminal group engaged in trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation, including minors, to the Kingdom of Bahrain, with 17 criminals sentenced to imprisonment.

In 2022, the authorities dismantled a criminal network of 11 persons involved in trafficking in persons in three regions of the Republic of Kazakhstan. 15 victims (including seven minors) of trafficking were identified. The victims were recruited through social media.

The latency of trafficking in persons crimes is one of the key challenges hindering the investigation. Mr. Kusetov also noted that victims refrain from contacting law enforcement, depend financially on their traffickers and fear public exposure, and that foreign victims tend to return to the country of their origin as soon as possible what often complicates the investigation.

The responsible stakeholders in Kazakhstan are implementing the 2021–2023 State Plan to prevent, counter, and combat crimes related to trafficking in persons (a new action plan for 2024–2026 is being drafted), run the inter-agency Committee to combat trafficking in persons composed of the representatives of the Ombudsperson, Human Rights Committee, ten other State bodies, NGOs and international organizations, render assistance and support for victims of trafficking paid from the State budget (eight types of services are rendered: social support, healthcare services, psychological, pedagogical, employment, cultural, financial and legal services), have drafted a new law on countering trafficking in persons. The new law focuses on strengthening partnerships among competent authorities and coordination of their efforts in combating trafficking in persons. The law seeks to improve prevention by enhancing risk assessment and procedures, promoting a victim-centered approach and establishing the national referral system. The new law will facilitate prevention and prosecution of trafficking in persons crimes, as well as protection of victims of trafficking.

The Kyrgyz Republic

Mr. Kubanychbek Mambetkulov, Head of the Department of the Prosecutor's Office of the Jalal-Abad region of the Kyrgyz Republic, shared that 14 criminal cases of trafficking in persons were registered and one case reached the court in 2021. In 2022, one trafficking in persons case was filed but the case was subsequently terminated. In January – July 2023, no trafficking in persons crimes were registered in the Kyrgyz Republic.

To ensure the implementation of international commitments in combating trafficking in persons, the Kyrgyz Republic has adopted a number of legal acts, including the law on prevention and combating trafficking in persons (amended in 2018), which introduced the National Referral Mechanism as one of the most effective tools to ensure the support for victims of trafficking.

To respond to new trafficking in persons challenges and trends, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic adopted four programs to combat trafficking in persons from 2002 to 2022.

In his presentation, Mr. Mambetkulov noted the establishment of the specialized working group within the Prosecutor General's Office in 2020 to facilitate the effective implementation of the State policy in the field of preventing and combating trafficking in persons. The functions of the above working group relate to strengthening the implementation of the mutual legal assistance and international cooperation, criminal data collection, as well as partnerships with law enforcement bodies, rehabilitation services providers, competent state bodies working in the migration field, NGOs, and international organizations. Since 2021, the Prosecutor General's Office of the Kyrgyz Republic has trained over 200 senior officials from law enforcement and prosecution bodies and plans to train another around 300 criminal justice practitioners.

According to Mr. Mambetkulov, the main challenges to effectively investigate and prosecute trafficking in persons crimes in the Kyrgyz Republic are the unwillingness of victims to contact law enforcement, compounded by law enforcement's lack of experience in conducting transnational investigations. He emphasized that the development of international cooperation and joint investigations would be the key solutions to cope with these challenges.

Republic of Tajikistan

Mr. Jamshed Abdumanonov, Head of the Department for Supervision of Compliance with Legislation on Judicial Acts in Criminal, Civil, Economic, Family and Administrative Cases of the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Tajikistan, highlighted that the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on Countering Trafficking in Persons details the survivor support processes introduced in 2014. Mr. Abdumanonov also reported on 199 registered cases of trafficking in persons and related crimes within 2022 and the first six month of 2023, including 58 trafficking in persons cases, 14 cases of the trafficking in minors, and 123 cases of organizing illegal labor migration. Additionally, the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Tajikistan prosecuted 30 perpetrators (2 male, 28 female) for trafficking in persons crimes and identified 49 female victims of trafficking.

Referring to the reported cases, Mr. Abdumanonov shared information about four investigated cases of trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation in the United Arab Emirates, the Republic of Türkiye and Sri Lanka committed by two Tajik nationals and two citizens of the People's Republic of China. Thus, in June 2022, a Tajik national (female) was arrested at the Airport of Dushanbe and sentenced to 8 years in prison for an attempt to traffic a 25-year-old Tajik woman to Istanbul, Republic of Türkiye for sexual exploitation. In April 2023, a Tajik female perpetrator was sentenced to 8 years in jail for trafficking a 29-year-old woman from Tajikistan to Dubai, United Arab Emirates for sexual exploitation purposes. In December 2022, a Chinese national (male) was sentenced to 10 imprisonment for an attempt to traffic 2 Tajik females for sexual exploitation in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Finally, another citizen of the PRC was sentenced to jail for an attempt of trafficking for sexual exploitation of a 27-year-old Tajik woman in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Mr. Jamshed Abdumanonov also dwelled on two cases of trafficking in minors, particularly on a sale by 28-year-old Tajik woman of her 4-months-old newborn son and a sale of

a 10-year-old girl by her 53-year-old grandmother. Both women were convicted of trafficking in minors and sentenced to imprisonment.

Implementing the internal action plan to counter trafficking in persons developed in 2022, the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Tajikistan conducted 341 awareness-raising workshops on trafficking in persons. In addition, 87 articles in mass media and 827 articles in periodicals were published to raise public awareness on trafficking in persons as part of preventive measures.

Turkmenistan

Mr. Arslan Nasyrov, Acting Head of the Main Investigation Department of the Prosecutor General's Office of Turkmenistan, reported zero registered trafficking in persons cases in Turkmenistan since 2021 as a result of systematic and effective preventive measures undertaken within the country.

Mr. Nasyrov noted that within the first six months of 2023, in partnership with UNODC the Prosecutor General's Office of Turkmenistan conducted workshops on identification and referral of victims of trafficking, as well as detection and investigation of trafficking in persons crimes. Besides, the Prosecutor General's Office held 10 workshops for 250 law enforcement officers and 154 information sessions for the main risk groups exposed to trafficking in persons crimes.

Special attention was brought to the update of the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan and Part 2 of Article 128 "Trafficking in Persons," which was complemented with additional qualifying features. Speaking on the partnerships established by the Prosecutor General's Office of Turkmenistan with international organizations, Mr. Nasyrov emphasized the support of UNODC in developing recommendations to enhance the legislation of Turkmenistan related to combating trafficking in persons and drafting the 2023–2025 National Action Plan to counter trafficking in persons in Turkmenistan, that will be focused on strengthening the coordination and partnerships in combating trafficking in persons, enhancing the capacity of competent authorities and ensuring the support to victims of trafficking.

Republic of Uzbekistan

Mr. Kholbek Abdullaev, Head of the Department of Supervision over the Implementation of Legislation in the Internal Affairs Bodies of the Prosecutor's Office of Syrdarya Region of the Republic of Uzbekistan, emphasized that combating trafficking in persons remains a state policy priority for the Republic of Uzbekistan. Thus, Uzbekistan adopted a new edition of law on countering trafficking in persons in 2020 and established the National Commission on Combating Trafficking in Persons and Forced Labour. The new edition of the law has resulted in

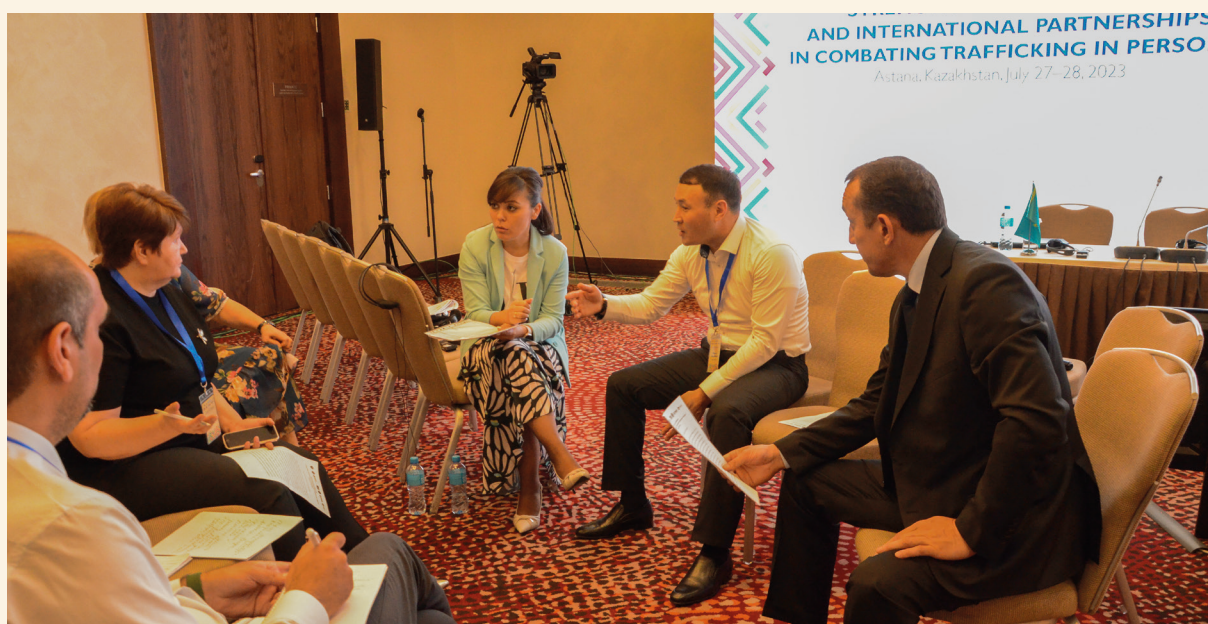
fortifying criminal liability for the recruitment of people for the purpose of exploitation under the Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Furthermore, at present the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan is considering the possibility of toughening the liability for trafficking in persons crimes.

Mr. Abdullayev also highlighted a 2% increase in registered trafficking in persons and forced labor crimes, as well as a 4% increase in prosecuted perpetrators for trafficking in persons crimes in 2022 and first half of 2023. He noted that this trend also relates to other crimes, for example, the authorities have observed a 20% increase in registered sexual exploitation cases.

Highlighting the preventive work undertaken by the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Mr. Abdullayev reported that Uzbekistan's relevant officials have conducted over 12,000 awareness-raising activities including publishing 2,000 articles in mass media (500 in periodicals, 1,200 on the Internet and 500 reports on TV and radio), installing over 1,200 information banners at airports and public places country-wide and disseminating over 1,000 brochures on the threat of trafficking in persons among the population.

Concluding the session, Dr. Reda Sirgediene noted that the information exchange like this panel discussion is very important. The interventions have demonstrated huge efforts of the law enforcement and judiciary bodies of the region in preventing and investigating trafficking in persons crimes and have provided guidance for further counter-trafficking action in the region.





Panel session: Profile of identified victims in 2022–2023

The session explored the profile of identified victims of trafficking through their demographics, age, gender, country of origin, vulnerability factors and psychological effects, as well as ways to improve their identification and assistance.

An expert who has personally experienced exploitation shared his perspective on how identification of trafficking victims and provision of assistance can be improved considering the survivor-centered approaches to create a more effective environment for identification of and

assistance for victims of trafficking, as well as for preventing re-traumatization. His story addressed the realities of trafficking, grounding the theme of the conference on his lived experience through: 1) identification of successful practices, 2) lessons learned, 3) victims' profiling based on experience, and 4) the changes over the recent years.

In addition, the story revealed numerous trafficking risk factors: an unfulfilled employment contract, financial vulnerability and deceptive recruitment. Upon arriving in Russia, his identity documents were confiscated, and he was forced to work in poor conditions. Nonetheless, he managed to escape and seek help what led to his rescue and return home with support from Istiqbolli Avlod. He subsequently started a successful furniture-making business, benefiting from victim support and rehabilitation services.

Overall, the profiles of identified trafficking victims in Central Asian countries indicate variations in terms of gender, nationality, age and forms of exploitation.

Republic of Kazakhstan

Ms. Nina Balabayeva from Kazakh Rodnik NGO overviewed the profile of identified victims of trafficking from 2022–2023: the majority of identified victims were men and Uzbek nationals, the average age of identified victims was between 33 and 50 years old, the prevalent forms of trafficking included labor exploitation, sexual exploitation and forced begging. Only one in eight victims was willing to report the crime to law enforcement.

Ms. Balabayeva outlined the challenge in counter trafficking in persons in the region – there is no common database on trafficking in persons. There is a need to merge databases and compile data with unified indicators. Now official statistics can differ from country to country due to differences in the definition of trafficking in persons. She also suggested creating a technical resource library on trafficking in persons that would help organizations collaborate based on shared information and practices. Such a library could be housed under the Law Enforcement Academy under the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Ms. Balabayeva also highlighted the need to actively inform the public about the existence of shelters through mass media. Finally, she called NGOs to support the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons campaign and shared a recent video her organization produced for the event.

The Kyrgyz Republic

Ms. Asel Koilubaeva representing Lawyers for Human Rights NGO in Kyrgyzstan overviewed the main successes in the country as regards combating trafficking in persons, namely improving the Kyrgyz Law on Guaranteed Legal Aid incorporating specific assistance for victims of trafficking in persons, training 60 advocates and 34 coordinators from the Legal Aid Service of the Ministry of Justice to help victims of trafficking. Lawyers for Human Rights NGO now works

with advocates from across Central Asia and plans to launch a working group of experts to exchange advice and discuss legal cases. However, there are few reported cases at the moment because identification of victims is low – an issue over which Ms. Koilubaeva expressed concern. She received four cases on trafficking in persons, in two of which Lawyers for Human Rights NGO facilitated the initiation of criminal cases in 2023. Thus, in the first half of 2023, the organization identified six victims (four men and two women) who received legal victim status and access to support and assistance that legal victim status provides. Finally, Ms. Koilubaeva shared her vision and a few recommendations on measures to be taken to effectively address trafficking in persons, including the following:

- Legal experts in cooperation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Prosecutor General’s Office should elaborate a victimological portrait based on scientific and methodological approaches;
- Articles 166 and 167 of the Kyrgyz Criminal Code should be reviewed to eliminate duplications and differentiate the sanctions;
- Special instructions should be developed for prosecutors dealing with trafficking in persons cases;
- Mass media should be more active in promoting public service announcements on countering trafficking in persons;
- There is a need for guidance for legal experts and psychologists on applying rulings in trafficking in persons cases.

Republic of Tajikistan

Mr. Mirzo Soliev from Femida NGO introduced the work of the organization outlining that the organization primarily had worked with survivors of labor exploitation and noting that this form of trafficking is prevalent in Tajikistan. Lack of information is identified as a significant obstacle to safe labor migration. Over 90% of migrants traveling abroad for work did not sign labor contracts, suggesting that potential victims may not be fully informed about their rights and protection. The efforts to inform children and youth about trafficking in persons are recognized as essential for prevention and awareness raising. There is a special fund for financial assistance for identified trafficking victims in Tajikistan, but currently it lacks sufficient resources.

Turkmenistan

Ms. Lyudmila Petuhova from Ynam, a Turkmen civil society organization, shared that there has been no single case of trafficking in persons registered in Turkmenistan in recent years. On the other hand, there were reported cases in the past where Turkmen citizens had become victims of trafficking in foreign countries. Describing the typical portrait of a Turkmen victim, Lyudmila noted that Turkmen victims usually have no education, financial independence and source of regular income. At-risk individuals and victims of trafficking are also affected by

negative stereotypes limiting their possibilities to improve the situation. Ms. Petuhova noted that without the cooperation with state agencies, NGOs can't work with victims of trafficking, and that the substantial progress in combating trafficking in persons can be achieved through active cooperation between NGOs and law enforcement bodies. Talking about the positive practices, Lyudmila emphasized that three Turkmen NGOs are members of the Inter-agency working group on countering trafficking in persons in Turkmenistan, a group of experts responsible for planning counter-trafficking activities within the country and reporting on their implementation.

Republic of Uzbekistan

Ms. Nazifa Kamilova from Istiqbolli Avlod organization told about rendering assistance to 83 victims of trafficking that returned voluntarily from abroad and discussed the conclusions of their study on victims of trafficking. The Preschool Education Ministry of Uzbekistan, represented by Ms. Lilia Gainutdinova, has taken proactive steps to raise awareness about trafficking in persons among high school students. They provided training for psychologists, developed educational materials and conducted training for over 14,000 students. To reduce vulnerability to labor exploitation, the Preschool Education Ministry introduced a special subject focused on forming life skills in schools.





Panel session: Follow-up on the implementation of the Bukhara Declaration

The panel session assessed the progress in combating trafficking in persons in Central Asia through the anti-trafficking measures enshrined in the Bukhara Declaration (2021).

Republic of Kazakhstan

Ms. Zhanar Seytaeva, the Acting Head of the Department of Special Training in Counteracting Global Threats of the Institute for Professional Training within the Academy of Law Enforcement Agencies under the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan, welcomed the participants and explained how the Bukhara Declaration was formulated and its goals using the motto "what can we do together to improve cooperation and coordination in combating trafficking in persons?"

She then provided an overview of Kazakhstan's efforts in implementing the activities outlined in the Bukhara Declaration. Firstly, the Ministry of Internal Affairs created the Directorate for Combating Trafficking in Persons within the Department for Combating Organized Crime. Furthermore, the Prosecutor General's Office created its own cross-cutting working group of the most experienced employees to prepare and implement a set of organizational and practical measures for combating trafficking in persons including establishing a system for collecting criminal justice data on trafficking in persons. Ms. Seytaeva's team also developed a practical guide on victim identification and referral for labor inspectors, social workers, teachers and employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Finally, the Ministry of Internal Affairs will draft instructions for the identification of victims of trafficking, which will be finalized and approved after the adoption of the new law "On Combating Trafficking in Persons." For further progress in implementing the Bukhara Declaration, Ms. Seytaeva recommended continuing annual conferences and monitoring the implementation.

As part of her statement, Ms. Seytaeva invited the Honorable Laura Agibayeva, a Judge of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Kazakhstan, to discuss why cases are not reaching the courts. Ms. Agibayeva highlighted the evidence admissibility as the main problem. Often, proving the intention of traffickers is difficult; therefore, crimes must be qualified differently. She also stressed the issue related to child trafficking: in Kazakhstan, an unmarried mother giving birth may indicate any man as the father of the child, what creates an easy way for legal adoption to develop in a form of child trafficking. However, when a parent transfers a child to a third party and the parent is not caught receiving money for the transaction, it is difficult to prove that exploitation and trafficking have occurred. Ms. Agibayeva suggested paternity testing as a potential solution for some of these types of cases.

In her conclusion, Ms. Seytaeva called the international community to develop national mechanisms for data collection, analysis and exchange among destination, transit and source countries. She emphasized the importance of delivering training for law enforcement inviting NGOs as direct service providers to speak about their first-hand experience with survivors. Finally, Ms. Seytaeva suggested introducing SOP with guiding principles of victim identification to unify national referral mechanisms in the region.

The Kyrgyz Republic

Mr. Marlis Dzhumabaev, Head of the 1st Department of the Main Criminal Investigation Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, noted that the international conference is an important platform for law enforcement to learn from each other. His presentation discussed the Kyrgyz state policy against trafficking including the Law on combating trafficking in persons, the National Referral Mechanism and the National program against trafficking in persons for 2022–2025. He echoed other presenters by recommending introducing a unified definition of trafficking in persons in accordance with the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, in national criminal legislation of the Central Asian countries.

In terms of progress in implementing the Bukhara Declaration, the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Interagency Working Group has carried out consistent and systematic capacity building initiatives on combating trafficking in persons for law enforcement, the judiciary and civil society. An electronic directory of NGOs connects the Ministry of Internal Affairs with international organizations through Memoranda of Understanding. The Government of the Kyrgyz Republic addressed legislative issues related to the rights of victims and non-punishment principle by amending Article 166 (Trafficking in Persons) of the Criminal Code to release victims of trafficking from criminal liability for crimes of minor gravity.

Mr. Dzhumabaev suggested utilizing the potential of other regional organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Anti-Terrorist Center of the Commonwealth of Independent States and Bureau for the Coordination of Combating Organized Crime and Other Dangerous Types of Crime in the Territory of States of the Commonwealth of Independent States to strengthen the efforts against trafficking in persons.

Republic of Tajikistan

Mr. Sobirjon Shohimardonzoda, Deputy Head of the Center for Combating Trafficking in Persons of the Department for Combating Organized Crime of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, shared that Tajikistan pays particular attention to international norms in the field of protection of human rights. The fight against transnational organized crime is one of Tajikistan's main policy priorities for preventing and combating the crime including trafficking in persons. An interagency working group is constantly analyzing and developing regulations, instructions and operational procedures. In 2023, this group prepared more than 18 legal documents on combating trafficking in persons.

He noted that in the past two years the number of identified victims has increased. In 2022 and in the first half of 2023, more than two hundred victims of trafficking in persons were recorded: men and women, children and adults, nationals and citizens of other countries. Similarly, the number of registered crimes increased from 2022 to the first half of 2023: the law

enforcement agencies recorded 86 cases of trafficking in persons in 2022 and 113 such cases in the first half of 2023.

Tajikistan's counter trafficking in persons efforts are aided by training seminars, round tables and other educational and scientific events involving law enforcement officers. Every year, about 350–400 individuals in law enforcement take special courses on combating trafficking in persons. Attendees include police cadets, students of the Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Faculty of Law of the National University. These classes help participants gain experience and improve their knowledge and skills.

In 2017, the Ministry of Internal Affairs established a specialized unit called the Center for Combating Trafficking in Persons, which has 30 employees. From 2017 through the second half of 2023, the Center detected and revealed 436 crimes related to trafficking in persons. In 2022, five cases of trafficking in persons committed by foreign citizens were registered in the Republic of Tajikistan. The other registered crimes were committed by citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan in foreign states, including the Russian Federation, United Arab Emirates and the Republic of Türkiye. Throughout 2017–2022, Tajikistan repatriated 31 female victims of trafficking from the United Arab Emirates, the Republic of Türkiye, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, India and the Republic of Kazakhstan.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many types of crimes were committed using the Internet. Currently, about 30% of detected trafficking in persons crimes are committed using information and communication technologies. The Center for Combating Trafficking in Persons conducts analysis and introduces information technologies to detect these crimes. In conclusion, Mr. Shohimardonzoda reiterated that Tajikistan is committed to protecting the rights and liberties of every person and citizen and is ready to cooperate with all countries.

Turkmenistan

Mr. Arslan Nasyrov, the Acting Head of the Main Investigation Department in the Prosecutor General's Office of Turkmenistan, provided an overview of the state policies against trafficking in persons including the National Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Persons, which will expire in 2023. In order to increase efficiency of the plan implementation, the Prosecutor General's Office established an interagency working group consisting of 16 ministries and departments within the Government of Turkmenistan, as well as a number of representatives of NGOs directly involved in the support, protection, and reintegration of victims of trafficking.

One of the key achievements and outcomes of the working group's efforts was the adoption of the new edition of the Law of Turkmenistan "On Combating Trafficking in Persons" on 15 October 2016, which came into force on 1 January 2017. The working group also developed numerous normative documents and instruments including a draft regulation on victim identification, a reporting format for monitoring on referral, an agreement on cooperation and a draft scheme of key processes of the National Referral Mechanism, as well as the procedures for social rehabilitation and repatriation of victims. In the first half of 2023, the Prosecutor General's

Office of Turkmenistan organized 154 awareness-raising sessions with the main risk groups, as well as ten thematic seminars for 250 law enforcement officers of Turkmenistan. Mr. Nasyrov noted that the development of a new National Action Plan of Turkmenistan against Trafficking in Persons for 2023–2025 is underway in close cooperation with the UNODC.

Republic of Uzbekistan

Mr. Shukrullokhon Fayzullakhonov, Chief Specialist of the Department for Combating Trafficking in Persons of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, outlined that Uzbekistan had substantially updated the regulatory frameworks in the field of countering trafficking in persons in the past three years. The country is a signatory to more than 60 international instruments, among them 29 treaties and agreements with other states on combating organized crime including trafficking in persons. There also have been changes in criminal procedures, for example, at the request of the competent authority of a foreign state, the norms of the procedural legislation of a foreign state may be applied at the territory of the Republic of Uzbekistan if they do not contradict the provisions of local legislation. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan is the body responsible for maintaining a unified centralized criminal database. Currently, the Ministry of Internal Affairs is developing a practical handbook on investigation, prosecution and adjudication of trafficking cases in close partnership with UNODC. He pointed out the uniqueness of the handbook and expressed special thanks to Dr. Reda Sirgediene, UNODC Regional Adviser for Central Asia on Countering Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants, and her team.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs also established the website www.ht.gov.uz and a call center to facilitate timely identification of victims of trafficking and provide necessary social, medical and legal assistance. He outlined that the reforms carried out in Uzbekistan had been showing positive results. They were also reflected in the U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report. In his speech conclusion, Mr. Fayzullakhonov noted that such events, where an invaluable exchange of practical experience takes place, are one of the most effective ways to improve the level of the fight against trafficking in persons.





Panel session: International support in combating trafficking in persons in Central Asia

Mr. Meder Dastanbekov, the Kyrgyzstan Country Coordinator for SMICA moderated the session. The panel addressed the types of support that international stakeholders provide, best practices and lessons learned.

UNODC

Dr. Reda Sirgediene, the UNODC Regional Adviser for Central Asia on Countering Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants, shared that UNODC, through its Regional Office for Central Asia covers Central Asia and the South Caucasus, and works on four directions in combating trafficking in persons: delivering expertise (developing and reviewing laws and other legal acts), investing in people (training people), building networks (partnerships) and providing the tools (developing manuals, handbooks etc.). Its technical assistance includes policy and legislative development, mentoring, data collection, research, support in development of national and international cooperation.

Dr. Sirgediene touched upon two regional workshops and one regional meeting that exemplified promising practices. The regional workshop on international standards and best practices in adjudication of trafficking cases has developed the expertise of judges in handling trafficking in persons cases, including evaluation of evidence and applying a victim-centered, human rights-based and gender sensitive approach during trials. Two regional workshops “Towards a more effective response to TIP, particularly of women and girls for sexual exploitation, through cross-border criminal justice cooperation mechanisms: the experience of the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia” facilitated a review of emerging trends in the region and provided an overview of requirements for more effective and efficient cooperation in investigation of transnational trafficking cases. On 31 March, UNODC facilitated a meeting of responsible representatives from the Ministries of Internal Affairs of Central Asian countries to discuss their vision for establishing the Central Asia Law Enforcement Network against Trafficking in Persons (CALENTIP). The purpose of the CALENTIP is strengthening the law enforcement response in the fight against trafficking in persons and related crimes in the Central Asia region and beyond through coordinated and targeted law enforcement efforts. Also, UNODC actively coordinated with partners the development of a new law against trafficking in persons in Kazakhstan.

In the Kyrgyz Republic, UNODC facilitated the development of the handbook on identification, handling and referral of trafficking victims for front-line and juvenile police officers and rendered training for over 228 practitioners, including 44 women. It also supported the establishment of a network of human rights defenders and pro-bono lawyers specializing in trafficking in persons cases.

In Tajikistan, UNODC conducted extensive consultations with responsible authorities. A sequence of activities is underway, covering 1) providing evidence-based strategy, policy and legal expertise; 2) investing in people through building human rights-based and gender equal operational capacity to address trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants; 3) activating agency-to-agency communication and facilitating bilateral and international cooperation; 4) supporting the identification, screening, referral, and protection of victims of trafficking and migrants in situations vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

In Turkmenistan, UNODC supported the efforts of the Government in countering trafficking in persons through numerous workshops, consultations, expert legal reviews and strategic counseling on policy development. Over 270 practitioners, including 60 women, en-

hanced their capacity in countering trafficking in persons. The Government is also supported in the development of the new action plan against trafficking in persons.

In Uzbekistan, based on several consultative meetings with the national counterparts, namely the Prosecutor General's Office, the Ministry of Internal and the Supreme Court, UNODC facilitates the development of the handbook on detection, prosecution and adjudication of trafficking in persons cases. Regional seminars for local actors are planned to be conducted around Uzbekistan, based on the developed handbook. In addition, UNODC convenes the regular Multi-Stakeholder Coordination Meetings on Countering Trafficking in Uzbekistan to plan activities and mobilize resources, as well as to review the results of the counter-trafficking efforts every quarter.

Winrock International

Ms. Ellie Valentine, the SMICA Chief of Party, introduced the 5-year SMICA project implemented by Winrock International in Central Asian countries (except Tajikistan), based on four objectives: partnership on a regional level bilaterally and multilaterally, prevention, protection and (only in the Kyrgyz Republic) prosecution. The number of victims receiving services from SMICA in the Central Asian region totals 9,287. Most beneficiaries are between ages 15 to 29, mostly Uzbek migrants, some beneficiaries are from outside of Central Asia.

In Kazakhstan, Winrock International participated in the working group to develop a new law against trafficking in persons in Kazakhstan, issued guidelines for frontline officers, provided training seminars for Astana and Almaty airport staff, reached a total of 2.8 million people with counter trafficking in persons information, cooperated with the Ministry of Internal Affairs within the framework of national action plan and actively works with youth.

The project trained the consular officers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic. In the Kyrgyz Republic, SMICA works on prosecution and supports the development of www.migrant.kg, a state informational resource that promotes safe migration. SMICA also produces media products (video clips, documentaries, etc.) to inform audiences, video courses for prosecutors and lawyers, provides direct support to migrants, victims of trafficking and potential victims of trafficking and works with private sectors (airlines, railways, HoReCa).

In Turkmenistan, SMICA trained government partners, informed vulnerable people of trafficking risks and continued to cooperate with UNODC to introduce basic human rights awareness to the private sector.

In Uzbekistan, SMICA produced SOP for shelters, provided support with a database and IT equipment to regional units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs combating regional trafficking in persons, developed the Smart Navigator youth training program on trafficking in persons, produced media products and aided in the initial development of the Bukhara Declaration.

Ms. Valentine shared some challenges to the operations of Winrock International, including burnout among NGOs, NGO funding, government turnover and constant need to train new government bodies, finding equal partners for effective transnational collaboration, as well as climate change pressure and the overall geopolitical situation in Central Asia.

U.S. Embassy Tashkent

Mr. Ulugbek Abdurakhmanov, the Criminal Fraud Investigator of the U.S. Embassy in Tashkent, discussed how they tackle visa fraud and trafficking in persons. The Overseas Criminal Investigations goal is to protect the integrity of the US passport and visa system, combat trafficking and prevent terrorism – almost all of which are crimes related to document fraud. The Overseas Criminal Investigations use several methods to achieve their mission: investigation (The Overseas Criminal Investigations facilitated the arrest of 9 traffickers in 2022 and the first half off 2023), training (Tashkent and Samarkand airport training with UNODC) and liaison (cooperation). In 2022, the Overseas Criminal Investigations trained 33,000 people, and with 15,000 people trained in the first half of the year they are on track to achieve similar results in 2023. He noted that it is useful to work with Overseas Criminal Investigations in Tashkent because their collaboration provides access to shared information, enables cooperation with other locations and facilitates cooperation with other law enforcement agencies.

IOM

Ms. Aliya Belonossova, National Programme Officer of the Sub-regional Coordination Office for Central Asia of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), noted that IOM has been working in Central Asia for 25 years. IOM closely works with the governments of Central Asian states to develop legislation on countering trafficking. The highlights include Tajikistan's great work on implementing a new referral mechanism, Uzbekistan's newly established national rapporteur who monitors countering trafficking and the Kyrgyz Republic's great work prosecuting trafficking crimes. Ms. Belonossova suggested that Kazakhstan can learn from other states' laws related to combating trafficking. She said that the greatest achievement of international organizations in combating trafficking is creating the collaborative network of NGOs of the region and underlined the importance of expanding it. According to Ms. Belonossova, it is important to invite various stakeholders to conferences. She also shared that IOM was the first organization to return victims of trafficking to their home countries so they are happy that national governments have joined the effort.

BOMCA

Mr. Donatas Skarnulis, Sub-Component Leader of the EU-funded Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA), presented the four components of their project, which included the security of borders and combating trafficking in persons, among others. Through the project, they delivered numerous seminars on investigations and victim identification, assistance, and support in the Central Asian countries for internal affairs staff, border control and migration officials and national security officials.

OSCE

Mr. Yuri Fenopetov, Deputy Head of the Mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Programme Office in Astana, noted that OSCE closely works with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Labor of Kazakhstan to improve the provision of appropriate support to victims of trafficking. To achieve it, OSCE trained more than 300 prosecutors, organized annual simulation training sessions and contributes to developing a new law on combating trafficking in persons in Kazakhstan. OSCE urges all countries to fairly prosecute traffickers and properly support victims of these crimes. In 2022, OSCE published a report on trafficking in persons. According to it, only 11 countries reported the increase of trafficking crimes and identified victims. Mr. Fenopetov also reiterated the poor exchange of information and data about perpetrators making it difficult to disrupt trafficking in persons in the region.

Interpol

Ms. Stephanie Baroud, Criminal Intelligence Analyst of the Interpol's Human Trafficking and Smuggling of Migrants Unit, made an overview of the overall structure of the Interpol, the work and operations carried out in the field of countering trafficking in persons, the technical support offered by the organization and its key partners. Ms. Baroud also noted that Interpol is currently running two global initiatives, one related to migrant smuggling and the other to trafficking in persons. As per the information provided by Ms. Baroud, starting from 2022, traffickers have been carrying out a large-scale cyber-enabled trafficking in Southeast Asia where they lured foreigners with false promises of lucrative job opportunities.



Panel session: Role of border guards, migration services, customs in the field of detection of trafficking in persons crimes and identification and referral of victims at the state borders

Mr. Yusuf Kurbonov, UNODC International Programme Coordinator, introduced the key activities implemented under the UNODC Regional Programme for Central Asia's Sub-programme 1, which aims to support Central Asian states' countering transnational organized crime, drug trafficking and terrorism. In his opening remarks, Mr. Kurbonov highlighted the unique role

that the border, migration and customs officers play in ensuring the security of the state borders and well-being of persons at risk of becoming victims of trafficking in persons.

He emphasized that identification of trafficking victims requires specialized knowledge and skills due to constantly changing modus operandi of traffickers and noted that the panel session provides a great opportunity for frontline officers of Central Asian states to exchange experience and best practices, thereby strengthening their capacities in countering trafficking in persons.

Republic of Kazakhstan

Mr. Nurzhan Ernazarov, Deputy Head of the Border Service of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, stressed that the conference was vital to further progress countering trafficking in persons in the region. He noted that an increased flow of persons and vehicles through Kazakhstan's borders creates additional challenges for frontline officers working at the borders and requires timely and effective measures to respond to urgent threats like trafficking in persons. He reported that the border service dismantled seven trafficking networks used to send Kazakh nationals to Qatar, Indonesia, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, the Republic of Türkiye and the Republic of Korea in 2019, two networks used to traffic Uzbek and Kyrgyz nationals into Kazakhstan for sexual exploitation and rescued 21 Kazakh nationals from sexual exploitation in the Kingdom of Bahrain in 2020. Mr. Ernazarov pointed out that the number of trafficked persons is not precise and could be higher.

At present, the Border Service is not represented in the national counter trafficking in persons system of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Based on the national legislation, border guards have neither the authority nor function to counter trafficking in persons although frontline officers at border crossing points could contribute to the effort because they have a direct contact with potential and actual victims of trafficking during transit and could engage in victim identification.

The Kyrgyz Republic

Mr. Nurlanbek Sultanbekov, Senior Officer of the Main Directorate of the Border Service of the State Committee of National Security of the Kyrgyz Republic, noted that the Border Service of the Kyrgyz Republic plays a key role in disrupting trafficking in persons crimes at state borders because border guards can identify victims of trafficking and refer them to assistance during the passport check and control. To prevent and counter trafficking in persons, the Border Service of the Kyrgyz Republic exchanges data on a regular basis with local law enforcement and migration services, as well as with Border Services of other countries due to transnational aspect of the crime.

In 2014, the Border Service of the State Committee of National Security of the Kyrgyz Republic completed the implementation of the Unified External Migration Record System that allows them to monitor the arrival, stay and departure of foreigners and stateless persons in the Kyrgyz Republic, as well as enables automated interagency data exchange. Mr. Sultanbekov concluded that all border crossing points in the Kyrgyz Republic are equipped with information stands intended to reach victims of trafficking and refugees.

Republic of Tajikistan

Mr. Eraj Davlatov, Deputy Head of the Department for Combating Customs Offenses of the Regional Customs Administration for the Sughd Region in Tajikistan, emphasized that the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on Combating Trafficking in Persons lists the Customs Service of Tajikistan as one of state bodies involved in anti-trafficking activities, particularly, in detection and suppression of trafficking cases across the state border of the Republic of Tajikistan. The Customs checkpoints at Tajikistan's airports are equipped with information stands to provide information on trafficking in persons at the state borders. The Customs officers are authorized to interview persons traveling abroad and suspected to be potential victims of trafficking.

The Customs officers of the Republic of Tajikistan continuously undergo training on border security, dual-use goods import control, prevention of extremism and terrorism, countering trafficking in persons and combating illicit drug trafficking. In 2023, the Customs officers of the Republic of Tajikistan participated in the thematic training organized by OSCE's Border Management Staff College, UNDP and BOMCA-10.

Turkmenistan

Mr. Akmyrat Halykov, Deputy Head of the Training Section of the State Migration Service of Turkmenistan, explained that the state counter trafficking in persons policy of Turkmenistan aims to protect individuals and society as a whole from the threats posed by organized crime. The State Migration Service of Turkmenistan counteracts trafficking in persons crimes by detecting and suppressing attempts by traffickers to send the victims of trafficking across the state borders of Turkmenistan and referring the identified potential victims to available services.

Moreover, Mr. Halykov stated that the state had successfully implemented two National Action Plans to counter trafficking in persons and is currently working in close collaboration with international organizations and civil society organizations to finalize the new action plan for 2023–2025.



Group work session: Response to contemporary threats through strengthening partnerships

Following the final session on the role of border and customs officers in combating trafficking in persons, the Conference included a group work session to encourage participants to think of new strategies for effective human-rights based and victim-centered collaboration in countering trafficking in persons, based on given cases. The participants were split into five small groups. Each group was asked to identify potential partners and develop a plan of action to respond to contemporary threats by strengthening partnerships based on their competence. The NGOs and state agencies highlighted their planned order of interactions, intended collaborators, and their victim referral process. The session demonstrated the challenges that partners handling trafficking in persons cases encounter, including the qualification of the crimes, identification, assistance, reintegration and rehabilitation of victims, application of the non-punishment principle, etc. The session was concluded with the idea that direct communication among responsible bodies of all the countries of the region while handling trafficking in persons cases would much facilitate the regional cooperation.



Conclusions of the Conference and way forward

The Third Conference further developed a constructive regional dialogue in combating trafficking in persons, provided a platform for informal networking and contributed to building bridges between key state and non-state actors in the field across the region and beyond. It revealed common challenges faced both by state and non-state actors in the region and contributed to outlining joint action and way forward to effectively address trafficking in persons crime and refer victims of trafficking to necessary services, leaving no one behind. This, in turn, shall lead to more active and effective cooperation in information exchange, detection and investigation of trafficking in persons crimes, as well as in providing assistance to victims of trafficking in persons and related crimes in the region.

The Third Conference also bolstered the commitment of participants to continue implementing the Bukhara Declaration and monitoring its implementation, as well as developing and implementing relevant instruments, including mechanisms for effective information sharing and transnational referral to tackle the transnational nature of trafficking in persons crimes more effectively.

BASED ON THE DISCUSSIONS, THE FOLLOWING CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD WERE FORMULATED

1. Regional Program to Combat Trafficking in Persons

Participants discussed the need for a Regional Program to Combat Trafficking in Persons in Central Asia, proposed by the Chairperson of the National Commission on Combating Trafficking in Persons and Forced Labor of the Republic of Uzbekistan to ensure a consistent, sustainable and unified approach to counter trafficking in persons and facilitate safe migration processes in Central Asian region. This program would include, *inter alia*, awareness-raising campaigns to build public resilience to trafficking in persons and enhancing the capacities of the key actors working in the counter-trafficking in persons field through specialized training programs across the region, including training for front-line officers working at the border crossing points.

2. Unified protocols and procedures

The Third Conference revealed that countries in the region are facing common problems. Such issues as incorrect qualification of the trafficking in persons crimes, victims' reluctance to report the crime and cooperate with law enforcement, and complicated evidence collection were acknowledged by the participants as key challenges. They affect the detection, investigation, and prosecution processes, as well as timely identification and referral of victims of trafficking to necessary assistance. Furthermore, improved coordination and interaction between the law enforcement agencies in the region, particularly the Ministries of Internal Affairs and the Prosecutor General's Offices, was highlighted as an important factor to ensure timely and comprehensive responses to trafficking cases. In the end, enforced criminal liability and increased conviction rates would increase the effect of the criminal justice response to trafficking in persons. The recommendations received from participating States and actors suggested:

2.1. Developing a regional database on trafficking in persons with a unified data collection system and exchange approach along with establishing a platform of designated liaison officers, as well as ensuring instant information exchange and proper analysis of trends and modus operandi of trafficking in persons crimes related to Central Asia.

2.2. Harmonizing articles on trafficking in persons in the criminal law of the Central Asian countries and procedures for victim-centered law enforcement action against trafficking in persons in the region including the officers working at the state borders.

2.3. Introducing unified victim identification indicators and victim referral mechanisms (national and international), as well as mapping the services available for victims of trafficking in the region.

2.4. Analyzing court decisions and gaps in trafficking in persons cases and respectively updating the training programs for responsible practitioners.

2.5. Compiling an e-library on trafficking in persons in the region to facilitate the access to available resources for self-study.

3. Addressing Online Exploitation

As acknowledged by the conference participants, the trend of online exploitation, including online sexual services and fraud, is rapidly increasing. While challenges in electronic evidence collection and differing legal systems for digital service providers were identified as major challenges to combat online exploitation, the necessity of engagement of the providers of social media platforms in preventive action along with the development of response protocols and tools to combat online exploitation was emphasized.

4. Involving the Private Sector

Considering the effectiveness of the whole-of-society approach to countering trafficking in persons and the role the private sector plays in preventing and revealing the crimes, promoting involvement of private companies in action against trafficking in persons was highlighted. The need for collaboration with industries including hospitality, e-service providers, social media, logistics and aviation companies was mentioned.

5. Involving Mass Media

Admitting the power of mass media in awareness raising and visibility, the participants recognized the need to seek more active involvement of mass media in countering trafficking in persons.

6. Implementation of Bukhara Declaration

For the next conference, the participants proposed a panel discussion on the challenges in implementing the Bukhara Declaration, which would be useful to address specific issues and needs of the participating countries, as well as to contribute to a common approach in coping with challenges faced by the states, enhancing the implementation monitoring and evaluation processes and preventing the duplication of matters discussed during the previous conferences.

As a guardian of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its complementary Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) supports Member States in their efforts to strengthen the criminal justice response to trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants through delivering expertise, investing in people, building networks and providing the tools, under the Global Programme against Trafficking in Persons. The conference in Astana, Kazakhstan was organised with financial support of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

For additional information please visit UNODC — [Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling](#)

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The USAID-funded Safe Migration in Central Asia activity is being implemented in Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. It is a five-year activity that uses evidence-based practices and cross-border connections to strengthen the mutual accountability and effectiveness of governments, NGOs, and the private sector to prevent trafficking-in-persons, protect survivors, and promote safe migration. The activity works in close cooperation with local governments, civil society, and the private sector to improve migration practices and prevent exploitation. For more information on USAID's work in Central Asia, visit

<https://www.usaid.gov/central-asia-regional>
<https://winrock.org/projects/safe-migration-in-central-asia/>

SMICA, the Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty, 100/4 Nursultan Nazarbayev Avenue, Prime Business Park, Office 208,

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