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Djibouti's Ranking Watered Down in TIP Report?

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This blog is part of a series based on the original, investigative research of the authors. Their full report can be found [here](#). The first blog – Djibouti: The Next Thailand? – can be read [here](#).

As has been observed in previous HTC blogs and elsewhere, the classification system used in the U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Reports has a long history of receiving scrutiny for being a political tool. The utter lack of transparency on its methodology and the seemingly political nature of the Tier ranking system both cast doubt on the objectivity of the TIP Report's data, as our research in Djibouti bears out.

Several factors indicate the TIP Report's assessment of Djibouti has also been politicized. To understand this suspicion, it is crucial to understand what information the TIP report includes and excludes about the gravity of human trafficking in Djibouti and to what extent the government applies itself to combat trafficking.

What does the TIP Report say about Djibouti?

The 2015 TIP Report stated several times that the Djiboutian anti-trafficking policy is severely lacking. In 2014, three trafficking victims were identified and one trafficker was convicted. This in the context of a country where yearly about 100,000 migrants pass through and the risk of trafficking is known to be high, as acknowledged in the opening sentences of the 2015 TIP report.

While acknowledging the various forms of trafficking occurring, the 2015 TIP Report also states that Djibouti's efforts to protect victims, prevent trafficking, and prosecute traffickers are all inadequate. This damning analysis is mitigated, however, by emphasizing that the government has "demonstrated continued interest in combating trafficking" and naming the few things that Djibouti is doing to combat trafficking- even though these measures are noted as ineffective.

A number of recent TIP Reports up until 2014 also stated that the demand for commercial sex, involving possible victims of trafficking in Djibouti City, is being sustained by the presence of foreign militaries. In the 2015 report, this sentence has suddenly been deleted in the near identical passages of the texts. This brings us to what the TIP Report does not mention about the human trafficking situation in Djibouti.

What is missing?

Curiously, information which shows the gravity of human trafficking in Djibouti and the way this is combatted (or ignored) which is reported by other departments within the U.S. government cannot be found in the 2015 TIP Report. For instance, a report also originating from the State Department on human rights practices states that there are 'credible reports of child prostitution on the streets and in brothels'. A report on child labor published by the U.S. Department of Labor uses even starker language stating that children in Djibouti are engaged in child labor, including in street work and commercial sexual exploitation.

In the 2015 TIP Report these facts are diluted, stating how "some" migrant women and girls "might" fall victim to forced prostitution, and "some" street children reportedly act as pimps for younger children. But the severity and pervasiveness of child prostitution is not as clearly stated as in the other publicly available reports.

Djibouti's anti-trafficking efforts are very limited as there is no real procedure in place to recognize victims of trafficking. Police officials are sometimes even part of the problem by exploiting vulnerable migrants who might have been trafficked by keeping them incarcerated until they pay for their release with sex or money. The round-ups of street children and other undocumented migrants are mentioned, though the complicity of government officials in the exploitation is not.

Also peculiar is the sudden omission of the influence of foreign military bases on the sex industry in Djibouti City in the latest report. Since the number of foreign soldiers in Djibouti is increasing as more foreign militaries are settling in Djibouti and the U.S. itself is also on an expansion course with their own base. The influence this significant foreign -and overly masculine- presence has on the sex industry in Djibouti City you can read in our previous blog.

Could it be politicized?

The TIP Report uses a classification system to rank countries' efforts of combating trafficking divided in four "Tiers." In the 2015 report, Djibouti "has not shown evidence of increasing efforts to address human traffickers," and "Tangible efforts to prevent trafficking were minimal overall." Still, Djibouti is placed on the Tier 2 Watch List for the fourth year in a row. However, according to the federal laws that mandates the TIP reports, Djibouti should have been automatically downgraded to the lowest Tier: 3. But the country received a waiver from this downgrade because 'the government has written a plan that, if implemented, would constitute making significant efforts to bring itself into compliance with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.' Remarkably, in the 2014 report Djibouti was granted a waiver for the exact same reason despite taking no action to implement the plan.

Being downgraded to Tier 3 can have real ramifications for a country's relationship with the United States: trade deals could be obstructed and financial aid halted. This is also what was most likely behind the controversial upgrade of Malaysia from Tier 3 to Tier 2 Watch List. If Malaysia would have been assigned to Tier 3 again, the country would have been barred from being part of Obama's prestigious Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal.

Maintaining favorable diplomatic ties with the Djiboutian government is equally essential for the United States. Djibouti is America's main hub in the War on Terror, their military presence there is of great strategic importance for counterterrorism and intelligence efforts in the region. The State Department website characterizes Djibouti as 'a key U.S. partner on security, regional stability, and humanitarian efforts' in the Horn of Africa, and it is emphasized that the country supports U.S. interests. These close relations can also be seen in the implementation of the Djibouti First initiative in November 2015, which seeks to give preference to Djiboutian companies to win goods and services contracts at the Camp Lemonnier base.

When confronted, the TIP Office neither denies nor confirms the statement that its report is politicized. Though the US embassy in Djibouti has assured us that it is working hard in cooperation with the Djiboutian government to improve the Tier ranking of Djibouti since this year, Djibouti cannot receive a waiver for an automatic downgrade anymore. It must either be upgraded to Tier 2 or downgraded to Tier 3. We are very curious to see how Djibouti has, or has not, improved in the past year and how this will be reflected in its Tier ranking in the 2016 TIP Report to be released this summer.