

Trump Administration Scales Back Anti-Human Trafficking Efforts

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The Trump administration's recent decision to significantly reduce the operations of the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP) has sparked concern among advocates and former officials. This move, announced last Friday, marks a stark departure from the Republican Party's long-standing commitment to tackling human trafficking, an issue that has historically garnered bipartisan support. He has dismantled a team dedicated to addressing labor and sex trafficking globally while also coordinating domestic efforts with agencies such as the Department of Justice, Health and Human Services, and Labor.

The reduction comes at a time when the administration faces scrutiny over its handling of investigations tied to Jeffrey Epstein, the disgraced financier who died in jail in 2019 while awaiting trial on federal sex trafficking charges. Officially ruled a suicide, Epstein's death has fuelled persistent conspiracy theories, some amplified by President Donald Trump himself, who once maintained a personal connection with Epstein. Public frustration grew this month when the Justice Department, led by Attorney General Pam Bondi, announced there was no Epstein client list to release. This reversal has angered some of Trump's supporters, who anticipated the list would shed new light on Epstein's network.

For years, Republicans have championed human trafficking as a flagship issue, advocating for stronger law enforcement and victim support. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has been a vocal proponent, co-sponsoring bipartisan legislation to aid trafficking survivors during his Senate tenure. As recently as May, Rubio raised alarms about rising trafficking in Haiti, criticising lax immigration policies under the previous Biden administration for enabling child trafficking into the United States. Similarly, Bondi, during her time as Florida's attorney general, prioritized anti-trafficking initiatives and later lobbied for a Christian advocacy group and the Qatari government.

The cuts, however, have blindsided those expecting robust support. "We genuinely believed the bipartisan consensus on trafficking would shield our office," said Cindy Dyer, former ambassador-at-large for the TIP office under Biden, in an interview with The 19th. Dyer noted that the office, which once employed nearly 90 staff, lost a dozen to a voluntary resignation programme earlier this year and saw roughly half its remaining staff dismissed last week, with others demoted. Now at the McCain Institute, Dyer expressed dismay: "The broad support we've had since the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 didn't protect us. People are shocked and disappointed."

The TIP office's work addressed critical issues, including sex trafficking, which disproportionately impacts women, girls, and LGBTQ+ individuals, and forced domestic labour, which also heavily affects women and girls. The office was tasked with producing an annual report for Congress, due on 30 June, considered a cornerstone of global anti-trafficking efforts. This year's report has been delayed without explanation, and last week's cuts have severely hampered the team responsible for it. The State Department has not yet responded to requests for comment.

The rollback extends beyond the State Department. The administration paused grants to non-governmental organisations combating trafficking, with their current status unclear. At

the Labor Department, nearly 70 programs and over \$400 million in grants to fight child labor and trafficking in countries with U.S. trade agreements were terminated in March, according to The Washington Post. These funds also supported a report on goods produced with child labour, a mandate now at risk.

“This is a devastating blow to decades of progress,” said a federal employee familiar with the issue, speaking anonymously due to fear of retaliation. “We hoped our work would be spared, especially given the focus on trafficking during Trump’s first term, when funding increased and Ivanka Trump made it a priority.” The employee referenced Ivanka Trump’s White House summit on the issue as evidence of past commitment.

Martina Vandenberg, head of the Human Trafficking Legal Center, outlined four key areas of federal anti-trafficking work: global efforts, prosecution, funding, and immigration policy, all of which have faced cuts. “It’s alarming to see these programmes gutted by an administration that campaigned on fighting trafficking,” Vandenberg said. Her organisation’s recent analysis revealed a record-low issuance of visas for trafficking victims cooperating with law enforcement, despite a growing backlog.

On Thursday, Trump announced that Bondi would seek federal court approval to release grand jury testimony from Epstein’s case, reversing her earlier stance. Meanwhile, Representatives Ro Khanna (Democrat) and Thomas Massie (Republican) are pushing a discharge petition to force a vote on releasing Epstein’s files, backed by several far-right Republicans, including Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert. Khanna expressed confidence, stating, “The MAGA base cares deeply about this. We have the votes.”

Next week, the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) will host its International Summit Against Human Trafficking, highlighting “bold solutions” and praising Trump’s immigration policies as a tool to curb trafficking. Days later, Freedom Network USA plans a webinar to address the administration’s “heinous attacks” on trafficking survivors, underscoring the growing divide in perceptions of the administration’s approach.