A Year in Review
Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Section

2023
Human trafficking and migrant smuggling are global crimes that use men, women, and children for profit. The organized networks or individuals behind these lucrative crimes take advantage of people who are in vulnerable situations, desperate to flee conflict and war or simply seeking a better life. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) strives for the eradication of these crimes through the dismantling of the criminal enterprises that trade in people and their hopes, the conviction of the main perpetrators and the support and protection of victims and people in vulnerable situations. Ultimately, our work safeguards people from the abuse, neglect, exploitation or even death that is associated with human trafficking and migrant smuggling.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our 2023 Impact in Numbers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How We Work</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivering Legal and Technical Expertise</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-Border Support for Victims of Human Trafficking in Peru and Ecuador</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Cooperation Needed to Fight Human Trafficking in South Eastern Europe</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STARSOM: Shedding Light on Migrant Smuggling from Asia to North America</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investing in People</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplying Knowledge and Tools</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracking Illicit Financial Flows Linked to Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring the Realities of Migrant Smuggling along the Western and Central Mediterranean</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paving the Way for Policymaking</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Events 2023</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Networks and Partnerships: Project TURQUESA</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreaming of a Better Life: Crossing the Darien Gap</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Outreach</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking Ahead in 2024</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Donors</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2023 was a dynamic and eventful year, but not without challenges that impacted the entire world.

As crises continued to unfold, more and more people were forced to leave their homes in search of safety or a better future. Our team worked with countries and communities around the world to find common solutions to the increasingly complex problem of migrant smuggling and protect those on the move. We brought countries in the Global South closer together and supported cooperation between different regions following a ‘whole of the route’ approach. Our interventions addressed the criminal elements of migrant smuggling, the links to crimes such as drug trafficking, arms trafficking and money laundering, and the abuses and exploitation that migrants suffer at the hands of criminals. We also analyzed the root causes of irregular migration and promoted the need for more legal pathways.

We published groundbreaking studies and provided extensive training on new forms of exploitation facilitated through online technologies, the role of corruption, and the management of proceeds generated by human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Benefiting from the gracious support of many survivors, we examined the changing patterns of human trafficking that make it difficult to identify victims and refer them for protection and assistance and given that one in three victims of this crime worldwide is a child, we remained firmly committed to safeguarding every child’s right to a safe childhood.

Looking ahead to 2024, we are learning from the work we have done to improve our approach. This is why, earlier this year, we launched a new “Action against Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling” to mark a paradigm shift in UNODC’s approach to tackling these crimes. We are increasing our field presence to get closer to the countries that need our help. We are embarking on new partnerships to harness the benefits of modern technology. We are creating a new type of programming that addresses human trafficking and migrant smuggling from different angles, including sustainable development challenges and climate change, and we have created a dedicated child trafficking and survivor engagement team to accelerate common action.
OUR IMPACT IN NUMBERS

34 Countries participated in our technical cooperation programme

12 Countries and 2 regional organizations supported to improve legislation and policy

2 Countries supported to develop new national plans against human trafficking

241 Human trafficking and migrant smuggling investigations initiated by UNODC-trained experts

264 Human trafficking victims identified and assisted by UNODC-trained experts

26 Survivors included in programme activities

5 Regional law enforcement networks launched

1397 Multi-stakeholder partnerships promoted

128 South-South Cooperation activities implemented

28 Intergovernmental fora on human trafficking and migrant smuggling supported in which 500+ national experts from more than 100 countries participated

264 Officials trained to counteract human trafficking and migrant smuggling

23 Tools, studies and reports launched

3,485 Youth initiatives supported while 186 youth (and children) participated in our programmes

1397 Experts from 114 countries used KNOWTS, our knowledge hub
Delivering Legal and Technical Expertise
We work with national authorities to draft, revise, and adopt laws, policies, and strategies.

Investing in People
We train and mentor officials to investigate the two crimes, assist the people affected, and bring the perpetrators to justice.

Supplying Knowledge and Tools
We produce analyses, studies and toolkits for training, research and policy reform that provide evidence-based and up-to-date knowledge.

Paving the Way for Policymaking
We support countries to collectively discuss experiences, challenges and successful practices in key UN and treaty bodies (the UN General Assembly, the UN Security Council, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ), the UNTOC Conference of the Parties and its Working Groups) and facilitate engagement with civil society.

Building Networks and Partnerships
We partner with international, governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as the private sector, to jointly tackle human trafficking and migrant smuggling.
Through our global programmes, in 2023, we supported the drafting of new and the revision of existing legislation, policies, and strategies against human trafficking and migrant smuggling in 12 countries and 2 regional organizations, and equipped 3,485 experts in the identification, investigation and prosecution of these crimes and in facilitating victims' access to justice.

- **Dominican Republic**: Trained law enforcement officers and prosecutors to investigate cyber-enabled trafficking.
- **Serbia and Albania**: Increased number of trafficked victims identified and referred to legal aid and financial compensation.
- **Montenegro**: UNODC-trained experts secured conviction in a human trafficking case.
- **Moldova**: Facilitated a cross-border investigation on human trafficking.
- **Uzbekistan**: Trained judges to better prosecute human trafficking cases.
- **Afghanistan**: Trained medical staff and reached 35,231 Afghans through health services and awareness-raising activities on human trafficking and migrant smuggling.
- **Bangladesh**: Trained 495 criminal justice professionals on addressing human trafficking and migrant smuggling with a focus on specialized responses.
- **Dominican Republic**: Trained law enforcement officers and prosecutors to investigate cyber-enabled trafficking.
- **Honduras**: Established a hotline to report human trafficking cases.
- **Peru**: Developed a georeferenced map of routes to better track the exploitation of Venezuelan migrant women.
- **Brazil**: Revised regulations to speed up access to residence permits for human trafficking victims.
- **Iraq**: Facilitated exchanges with intelligence agencies for better information sharing, including Europol and Eurojust.
- **Comoros**: Supported a new draft law against migrant smuggling.
- **Turkmenistan**: Reached 260+ youth through an awareness campaign on human trafficking.
- **Pakistan**: Launched a national awareness campaign on human trafficking and migrant smuggling.
- **Moldova**: Facilitated a cross-border investigation on human trafficking.
- **Uzbekistan**: Trained judges to better prosecute human trafficking cases.
- **Afghanistan**: Trained medical staff and reached 35,231 Afghans through health services and awareness-raising activities on human trafficking and migrant smuggling.
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CROSS-BORDER SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN PERU AND ECUADOR

When a Venezuelan migrant fled her abusers in Ecuador and crossed the border illegally into Peru, she could have faced deportation and further traumatization.

Instead, due to the creation of a Binational Immediate Response Team between Peru and Ecuador, supported by UNODC, she received the support and protection she needed, despite her irregular status.

The team, known as ERI from the Spanish name ‘Equipo de Respuesta Inmediata’, is part of our TRACK4TIP initiative and aims to enhance protection measures for victims of human trafficking and to support coordination between the two countries’ law enforcement officials.

Thanks to this work, nine victims of human trafficking – six of them women – have been identified at the borders of Peru and Ecuador. Three of them were of Venezuelan origin.

The victims were assisted to return to their countries safely. In cases where they did not want to return, they were assisted with obtaining a special residence permit to stay in either Peru or Ecuador.

We continue to provide technical assistance to the ERI in identifying and protecting victims of trafficking, in line with the UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol and other key international legal frameworks.
MORE COOPERATION NEEDED TO FIGHT HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

In 2023, we trained 255 law enforcement officials, prosecutors and judges from Moldova, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania as part of the UN.Locking project.

The project, which is funded by the US government’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, seeks to secure justice for victims of human trafficking in the region and train criminal justice professionals to strengthen responses and reinforce measures to protect victims of this crime.

While legislative and institutional frameworks on addressing human trafficking are in place and in line with international standards in the region, there are gaps in their adequate implementation and operationalization. In many cases, these challenges result from the lack of ability of first responders and experts to identify instances of this crime, distinguish them from other offences, apply victim-centred approaches, and substantiate cases by collecting adequate evidence.

Officials who attended the UNODC training reported their involvement in more than 100 investigations and prosecutions of human trafficking cases. They also identified over 90 victims.
STARSOM: SHEDDING LIGHT ON MIGRANT SMUGGLING FROM ASIA TO NORTH AMERICA

The criminal networks that smuggle migrants on the long and dangerous routes from South Asia to North America have become more ruthless and efficient. They are often involved in corruption, document fraud, drug trafficking and human trafficking, as well as other forms of criminality.

Profit margins for smugglers operating on these routes are substantial. On average, smugglers charge from a few hundred US dollars for short land crossings up to over 10,000 dollars for multi-country routes via sea or air hubs. There are even reports of charging up to 55,000 dollars for crossing the Atlantic by sea.

Migrants along these routes are vulnerable to human trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation, especially those who are stranded for long periods of time and need to earn money for the next step in their journey. In Central America migrants are regularly subjected to abuse, violence and sexual assault, and women and girls are the primary victims.

These are some of the main findings of the two-year STARSOM project that we implemented between 2019-2023 with the support of Canada’s Anti-Crime Capacity Building Programme. The objective of the project was to help countries improve investigations and prosecutions of smuggling cases while reducing the threats and risks for the migrants involved.

Through the project, we trained and mentored more than 800 experts from 14 countries on how to investigate and prosecute migrant smuggling. The training resulted in the investigation of more than 90 cases and the launch of joint investigations among participating countries.

STARSOM’s activities provided valuable information on the extent of the crime along the routes from South Asia to the USA and Canada, through the Arab Peninsula, West Africa, as well as South, Central America and the Caribbean.

The STARSOM project also included mentoring for law enforcement and judicial authorities to better investigate and prosecute migrant smuggling and produced a series of recommendations to improve responses.
“The knowledge gained from our workshops doesn’t stay in the meeting room.”

Stojna Atanasovska Dimishkovska, UNODC National Programme Officer, North Macedonia

“UNODC’s training and coaching have had a profound impact on both my personal and professional life. The knowledge gained, along with national and international exposure, training materials, and mentorship, are key factors in my professional journey.”

Saima Batool, Police Officer, Pakistan

“The support of UNODC was invaluable for the preparation and adoption of the National Action Plan to combat trafficking in persons in Burkina Faso.”

Maimounata Ouattara, Ambassador of Burkina Faso and Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Vienna

“I could see the participants’ change in perception of the crime of migrant smuggling through the training.”

Ishita Rony, Deputy Secretary of the Public Security Division, Ministry of Home Affairs Bangladesh
“The UNTOC Working Group offers the opportunity to address the failure to effectively prevent trafficking of children and bring forward recommendations to protect and ensure the rights of child victims and children at risk of trafficking.”

Siobhan Mullally, Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, United Nations

“The Working Group offers the opportunity to address the failure to effectively prevent trafficking of children and bring forward recommendations to protect and ensure the rights of child victims and children at risk of trafficking.”

Siobhan Mullally, Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, United Nations

“The training provided by UNODC was very useful and valuable for judges who are involved in the area of human trafficking. The experience gained at the seminar will be applied in our work in resolving trafficking cases.”

Farrukh Turakhodjaev, Judge, Court of Tashkent, Uzbekistan

“The Immediate Response Team created with the support of UNODC will enable us to strengthen our work to protect victims of human trafficking.”

Janeth Andrade Cajahuaringa, Legal Analyst, Ministry of Interior, Peru

“The UNTOC Working Group on Trafficking in Persons offers participants an opportunity to discuss with their peers issues of concern arising from their practice.”

Patt Prugh, Co-Chair, UNTOC Working Group on Trafficking in Persons
SUPPLYING KNOWLEDGE AND TOOLS

In 2023 we released six publications:

- Study on Illicit Financial Flows Associated with Smuggling of Migrants and Trafficking in Persons
- Accessing Justice: Challenges Faced by Trafficked Persons and Smuggled Migrants
- The Scope of Transcontinental Migrant Smuggling from South Asia to North America
- How to Conduct Mock Trials and Investigation Simulations Based on Trafficking in Persons Cases
- Mentoring Guide for Law Enforcement on Smuggling of Migrants and Aggravating Circumstances
- Links Between Smuggling of Migrants and Organized Crime along the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes
Migrant smuggling and human trafficking are highly lucrative businesses that treat people as commodities. UNODC’s “Study on Illicit Financial Flows Associated with Smuggling of Migrants and Trafficking in Persons” sheds light on illicit financial flows generated by these crimes, including payments, expenses and other revenues.

The study – conducted under the Global Action against Trafficking in Persons and the Smuggling of Migrants (GLO.ACT), a UNODC project funded by the European Union and implemented in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) – focuses on the cross-border movement of money from several countries in Asia and the Middle East to Europe. The study shows that highly organized criminal groups, as opposed to individuals and small criminal networks, make the highest financial gains from the two crimes.

In migrant smuggling, payments are usually made for transportation, accommodation, fraudulent work permits, passports and visas.

In human trafficking, illicit financial flows derive from the recruitment and control of the victims, as well as their exploitation. For example, reported cases reveal that trafficked girls and women were sold for as little as 36 USD and as much as 23,600 USD.

The study found that criminal networks frequently use payment and transfer methods that are not easily traceable by the authorities. While money transfer service providers and banking institutions are used, the more common methods are direct cash payments and use of the hawala – a money or value transfer system in which money is transferred without any actual movement of cash but rather through transactions between hawala brokers, who operate on a system of trust. While it is overwhelmingly used for legitimate purposes, some of its attributes make it vulnerable to use by organized crime groups, including smugglers and traffickers. In some cases, illicit finances are registered as legal income of legitimate businesses and are processed and transferred together with legal funds.

The study shows that the illicit income made by smugglers and traffickers is largely spent in one of three ways: sent back to the country of origin, used to support a lavish lifestyle or registered as legal income of legitimate businesses.
The Mediterranean is one of the deadliest routes for migrants and refugees. Tens of thousands of people have disappeared or lost their lives in the region over the past decade. Many have suffered fateful consequences at sea in unseaworthy vessels operated by smugglers.

With the support of France, we explored the complex dynamics at play along these routes.

Migrants embarking on perilous journeys on the Western and Central Mediterranean routes often encounter harsh conditions. Many who attempt to cross the sea never even make it to its shores.

Criminal networks take advantage of migrants’ vulnerability to extort money and exploit them sexually or for forced labour, particularly in gold mines in North Africa, West Africa and the Sahel.

Our findings suggest that there is no single group coordinating smuggling activities in the region. Instead, the landscape is characterized by a mosaic of groups with varying degrees of organization.

While some parts of the smuggling routes involve only individuals and small, loosely linked groups with little sophistication, others are under the control of powerful organized criminal networks with a high degree of hierarchy and professionalism, operating across several countries.

We have seen that migrant smuggling on these routes is linked to systemic corruption. Smugglers pay bribes to state and non-state actors at various levels to facilitate the journey. Preliminary data also shows links between migrant smuggling and human trafficking.
Human trafficking and migrant smuggling are complex and dynamic crimes. Our platforms exchange and deliberate on trends, challenges, and effective responses, critical to identifying lasting solutions to prevent and counter these crimes.

We facilitate exchange between UN Member States and other relevant stakeholders to discuss responses to international crimes while protecting, supporting, and empowering the people affected.

In 2023, we serviced 5 key UN intergovernmental meetings, providing in-depth background papers, expert guidance, presentations, and briefings to facilitate discussions. We also developed and disseminated 11 specific technical and analytical papers to policymakers through intergovernmental fora.

In our coordinating role among UN agencies, we supported the heads of organizations that are part of the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) to meet at the UN headquarters in New York and launched a Call to Action for the implementation of comprehensive measures to prevent child trafficking and protect the victims.
# Key Events in 2023

## Working Group on Trafficking in Persons

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<th>Registered Participants</th>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>International and Intergovernmental Organizations</th>
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<td>453</td>
<td>101</td>
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Topics:
- Child trafficking
- Human trafficking and corruption

## Working Group on Smuggling of Migrants

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<th>Registered Participants</th>
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<td>443</td>
<td>98</td>
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Topics:
- Who are migrant smugglers?
- Migrant smuggling by sea

## Constructive Dialogue on Trafficking in Persons

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<th>Non-governmental Organizations</th>
<th>Member States Participated in the Meeting</th>
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We supported discussions on child trafficking and the rampant role of corruption in human trafficking through solid background papers providing evidence-based information on these issues, as well as expert events held on the sidelines.

## Constructive Dialogue on the Smuggling of Migrants

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<th>Non-governmental Organizations</th>
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<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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This was the second year that the UNTOC Constructive Dialogues on Trafficking in Persons and the Smuggling of Migrants have been held. As Dialogues’ secretariat, we offered civil society the possibility to engage with countries and discuss ways to better combat these crimes. We briefed the speakers in preparation for the discussion and drafted the summary of the deliberations, which includes policy recommendations on the topics discussed. In addition, we provided technical and substantive guidance to the Member States upon request on ongoing and emerging issues related to these crimes, including through research and analysis.

## Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ)

We serviced the negotiation of a resolution at the 32nd Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice on human trafficking in business operations, public procurement and supply chains, and provided background information to the penholder State, upon request.
BUILDING NETWORKS AND PARTNERSHIPS

In Latin America and the Caribbean, organized crime groups make billions of dollars from human trafficking and migrant smuggling. In 2023, we launched Project TURQUESA, a joint initiative with the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), funded by the Government of Canada, to better combat these crimes in the region.

Project TURQUESA draws on the strengths of both organizations to ensure a whole-of-justice approach to addressing human trafficking and migrant smuggling. It ensures that the rights of smuggled migrants and victims of trafficking are fully respected. The initiative provides critical research and operational and strategic analysis to improve the understanding of the routes, trends and modus operandi of traffickers and smugglers. Gender considerations are integrated throughout the project.

Under this initiative, we provided specialized mentoring support to 32 prosecutors and law enforcement officials from 18 countries in the Latin American region, 56 per cent of whom were women. The training focused on enhancing participant knowledge of advanced criminal investigation methods, including the use of new technologies.

In late 2023, Interpol conducted Operation Turquesa V, in which nearly 50,000 checks were carried out at migration checkpoints in 33 countries. The operation resulted in the arrest of 257 suspected traffickers and/or smugglers and the rescue of 163 victims of human trafficking.
The Darien Gap is one of the most dangerous migration routes in the Americas. It is a dense tropical forest covering over 575,000 hectares between Panama and Colombia. High temperatures, wild animals and dangerous terrain are common along the route.

UNODC works with the countries in the region to prevent migrant smuggling, prosecute perpetrators and assist migrants. Our experts support transnational investigations into smuggling networks and the tracking and seizure of the illicit proceeds of this crime.

In November, we went to the Darien Gap to talk to migrants and local authorities to better understand their challenges. We learnt that more than 500,000 migrants crossed the Gap in 2023 – the highest annual figure ever recorded. Many came from Venezuela, Ecuador and Haiti, and there were hundreds of people from Asia and Africa. The majority were young men travelling alone, but it is not uncommon to see entire families crossing the jungle.

Smugglers frequently use social media to advertise the “opportunity” to reach North America through the Gap, luring people into the jungle as something attractive, fast and safe. They promise migrants that they will be on the other side in a day when in reality the journey can take more than a week.

These smugglers charge migrants between 180 and 330 USD per person to simply let them enter the Gap. While crossing the jungle, migrants may suffer rape, kidnapping and other violence, sometimes even death, at the hands of smugglers. The jungle’s wild biodiversity, size and remoteness make it very dangerous to cross on foot.

Once they exit the Gap, migrants still have to cross thousands of miles to reach their countries of destination in North America. The business of migrant smuggling can be more lucrative when the journey is long, arduous and dangerous. Globally, UNODC estimates that this business is worth $5-7 billion.
GLOBAL OUTREACH

Through our external communication channels, we provide audiences worldwide with the latest news about our work.
LOOKING AHEAD IN 2024

Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling on the Global Agenda - Key Events

26-27 APRIL
Islamabad, Pakistan
Regional Conference on the Smuggling of Migrants

13-17 MAY
Vienna, Austria
33rd Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ)

13 JUNE
Tashkent, Tajikistan
3rd Meeting of the Central Asian Law Enforcement Network against Trafficking in Persons (CALENTIP)

8-9 JULY
Vienna, Austria
14th Working Group on Trafficking in Persons

10 JULY
Vienna, Austria
3rd Constructive Dialogue on Trafficking in Persons

11-12 JULY
Vienna, Austria
11th Working Group on the Smuggling of Migrants

15 JULY
Vienna, Austria
3rd Constructive Dialogue on the Smuggling of Migrants

30 JULY
World Day Against Trafficking in Persons

22-23 SEPTEMBER
New York, United States of America
Summit of the Future

14-18 OCTOBER
Vienna, Austria
12th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and its Protocols

3rd Constructive Dialogue on Trafficking in Persons

11th Working Group on the Smuggling of Migrants

12th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and its Protocols

Principals Meeting of the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT)

Global Network of Prosecutors and Investigators on Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling

Vienna, Austria

Vienna, Austria

Tashkent, Tajikistan

Vienna, Austria

Vienna, Austria

New York, United States of America

Vienna, Austria

Tashkent, Tajikistan

Vienna, Austria
Human trafficking and migrant smuggling are global, widespread, and lucrative crimes that reduce people to commodities. Our goal is to ensure that countries are properly equipped to respond to these crimes, protect and assist the people who are exploited or abused, and secure the convictions of the perpetrators. This work would not be possible without the generous support of our donors who share our goal and continued to invest in us during 2023.